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What WOZ

Lost Objects, Repeat Viewings, and the Sissy Warrior

Representation always follows two laws: it conveys more than it intends and it is never totalizing.
—Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*

Nobody likes a sissy. That includes dykes, faggots, and feminists of both sexes.
—Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*

Judy Garland as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*—with Toto

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It's like you could read what's inside me

To see again.

To go to a movie repeatedly is to reenter a previously inhabited world—a darkened space constructed of conscious fondness, unconscious memory, the materiality of visual representations, the subjectivity of identifications with one's spectator-companions. To see a movie again is not simply to revisit an old site, or to confirm a truth of perception once held and now lost, but to construct anew a space of common laughter, stillness, breathing. To see a movie repeatedly is to respatialize the body, to breathe together with others who may have shared this movie too, and to breathe again with the lost first-spectator you once were. Reviewing film is a negotiated practice, upsetting and refiguring stable definitions of time (as linear), history (as fixed), spatial relationships (as synchronic), identity (as transcendent).

You're out of the woods, You're out of the dark, You're out of the night

I'm guessing that every white middle-class gay man has his own Judy Garland story. This is mine: One day when I was five years old, and living on Guam, my mother told me Judy Garland had died. I panicked. I said to my mother, "But that means they'll never show *The Wizard of Oz* again." To me, every time the film was shown on television, something was really happening, somewhere. I had absolutely no dialectic relationship to film—I didn't believe the object bore an indexical relationship to the profilmic site; I didn't know I was being sutured into a passive desiring subject position by the ideology of the Classical Hollywood apparatus; I had no idea that "I" had already been constructed in language, playing a *fort/da* game between being and meaning. I only knew I wanted the movie to *happen,* again. There was something else that day. As I was having my five-year-old existential crisis over the reality of the film event, in New York City a clutch of drag queens, mourning the death of Garland in their own way, were—through the politically savvy use of media representations—transforming themselves with anarchic fury from victims of the closet into Stonewall rioters.

Bert Lahr as the Cowardly Lion.

Photo: John Kobal Stills Collection

The simplistic causality is often mythologized: the drag queens in Greenwich Village, crying into their cocktails as one in the ultimate Garlandian tribute to their fallen icon, rise up as one and collectively begin shifting the signification of "gay" from victim to equality-demanding rioter.[1] Out-of-the-closets-and-into-the-streets! where the defining and protective darkness of the bar, the fantasy-producing movie theater, and suffocating childhood homes are all hopefully obliterated in the act of pouring out of the pitch black of a metaphorical closet and into the brightness of a very real street with very real material properties. The romantic connection between Garland's death and the beginning of a national gay rights movement in the United States temptingly fuses fields of politics, psychoanalysis, history, and aesthetic pleasure, providing a defining moment of narrative clarity for this movement. The mythological trajectory I would seem to have been caught in—that of a five-year-old, not-yet-but-soon-to-be-gay boy being hailed unknowingly by a group of rioting drag queens singing "Come out, come out, wherever you are"—would not catch up to me until 25 years later, when I viewed *The Wizard of Oz* again in the darkness of San Francisco's Castro Theatre.

I'm afraid there's no denyin'
I'm just a dandy-lion,
A fate I don't desoive

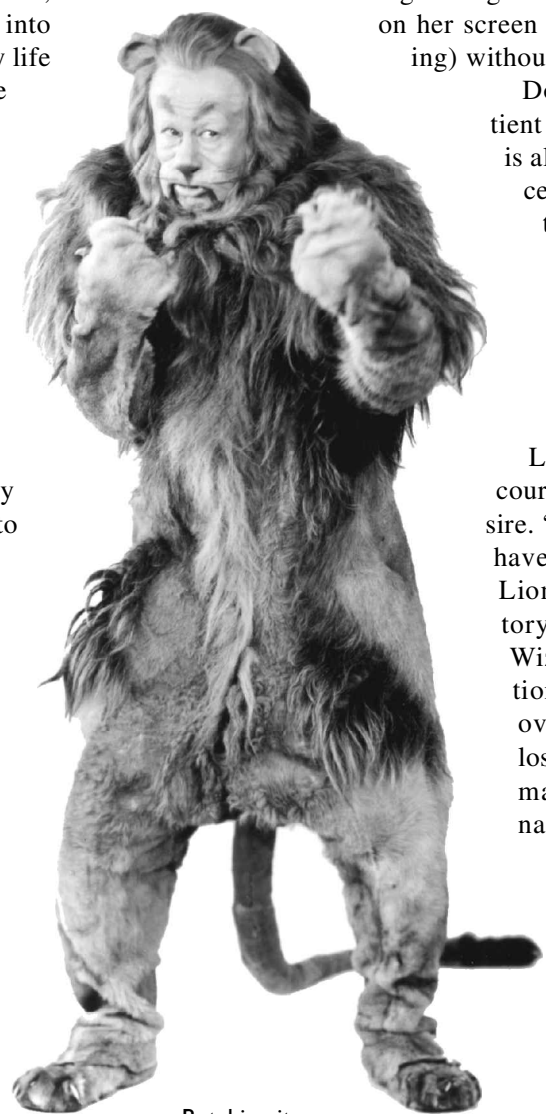
As Mark Rappaport shows in his documentary film *The Silver Screen: Color Me Lavender* (1998), while Hollywood in the 30s and 40s had numerous uses for the sissy as a stereotypical character (the dandy butler, the gossipy gadfly, the effete snob), it couldn't handle tying the portrayal of a homosexual to the narrative center of a film. The threat (or non-threat) to "normal" men of feminine emotional excess was played out in characters visibly marked as homosexual, but while the genre of the female melodrama was in force in the 30s and 40s, anything like a sissy melodrama was nonexistent: sissy-subjectivity was most definitely found only in the margins, absorbed by the "low" genres comedic and musical.

How then does "sissy" come to mean "effeminate man," and why would sissy necessarily get aligned with "homosexual"? In fact, why did Hollywood need to display sissified homosexuality at all? Positioned outside a direct association with adult homosexuality as Bert Lahr's performance is (situated as it is in a fantasy scenario, appealing as it does to identity-forming children), his Cowardly Lion may reveal more about the construction of gay subjectivity than a realistic representation of a homosexual itself. As Richard Dyer has pointed out in *The Matter of Images,* a society can only make sense of itself, indeed constructs itself, through social consensus over the meaning of aesthetic representations recognizable as stereotypes. *The Wizard of Oz*'s stereotype of sissiness, the Cowardly Lion, operates both as an aesthetic (the character of the Cowardly Lion) and a social construct (a production of the sissy type). Lahr's performance, however, operates both within and beyond the text, and between the text and spectator, such that "sissy" and "effeminate" negotiate with the dominant modes of both the film and society. The performance deftly produces and upsets the act of stereotyping itself, whose ideological purpose is "to make the invisible visible, so there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm, and separate what is in reality fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit."[2]

In his first scene in *The Wizard of Oz,* the Cowardly Lion is a figure at war with his own desires, producing an excess, in body and voice, of sissiness. Desperate to display himself as male and make invisible all feminine characteristics, the Lion is a flurry of contradictory gestures and vocal inflections. On his first entrance, the Lion attacks the other travelers in an exaggerated way; this ornamentally masculine bullying goes on for three minutes to the point of comic excess in what will soon be revealed to be an overdetermination, a compensation for the character's essential effeminacy. For children watching the film, the Lion is every bully they encountered in every playground in the world, exposed as a girly-lion, or, in the Lion's words, "a sissy," when Dorothy bops him on the nose with her parental "Shame on you." The Lion's gestures immediately shift from aggressive male (the crouched fighting position, the fists, the snarling teeth) to sissy boy (groping his own tail/penis, bursting into tears). As the Lion goes on to explain, it is not as simple as putting on an act, for to be a real man, to "*be* a lion, not a mou-ess" (italics mine) requires something elusive, something absent, something perhaps the Wizard can bestow. It is not courage the Lion lacks, it is essential masculinity. It is not cowardice the Lion possesses, but femininity in the insidious form of sissiness. The Lion is aware of how his body is being read: his gesture on the line "I'm just a dandy-lion" is a

stereotypical limp wrist, a kind of inversion of the clenched fist and a way of giving himself the finger.

He also signifies sissy in his voice. Lahr's vocal excess on the "ess" in "mouse" comically feminizes mouse as a clear counterpoint to what a lion should be, essentially. This vocal excess overflows the character and the bounds of the narrative. In his first scene, Lahr's Lion wails, whips, trills, and fawns, bursting into effusive tears on such lines as "My life has been simply *unbearable*." The result is undeniably comic, and the ways in which generations of spectators have embraced the Cowardly Lion suggests the representation is probably benign. I also wish to note here the powerful message that most bullies are really cowards, a value the film conveys comedically even within my critique. However, the melodramatic excess is displayed not only for comic effect; it also works to show that what is underneath the joke, what is underneath the artifice, what is (to quote Dyer) invisible is also profoundly threatening.



Butching it up.

The Lion is marked as a sissy who holds the group back in the pathetic throes of his own panic and the desire for security, all the more frustrating to fellow travelers on the Yellow Brick Road and comic to spectators because of the obvious disparity between the ferocity of the signifier "lion" and this comically aberrational signified. Just before Dorothy bops the Lion on the nose, revealing him to be both a sissy and a bully, the shot reveals visual plenitude (the depth and richness of the forest, the abundance of aural cues, and all four main characters in the frame). Immediately after Dorothy strikes the Lion, the camera cuts to the Lion's face. Dorothy is looking at him but we never see her reaction; her eyes are just outside the viewer's field of vision. Thus at the same moment we are given the plenitude of his response to her slap through the closeup, we are denied the sight of her gaze—her eyes are the absent field. We do not get a reverse shot of Dorothy's face to suture us back, and this lack, this desire, haunts the Lion throughout the film. He is, of course, doing it for Dorothy. The film continues to construct the Lion as a viewed object through its use of the Witch's magic image ball, which can spy on the object on her screen (frequently it is the Lion crying) without being seen.

Dorothy and the others are patient with the Cowardly Lion, who is allowed his indulgences and excesses, be they emotional (fits of tears), verbal ("Wouldn't you be ashamed to be seen in the company of a cowardly lion? I would"), or material (running away, fainting, pitching himself through glass windows). But ultimately the Lion's wish isn't only about courage, it's about gender, and desire. "It's been in me so long, I just have to tell you how I feel," the Lion trembles before his expository version of "Off to See the Wizard." This empathic connection made with the audience is over gender: the Lion wants to lose his weakness and be a "[real, male] lion, not a [sissy, effeminate] mou-ess." After furiously failing to meet his own and others' demands to be a man or butch it up or, at the very least, *fake it,* the Cowardly Lion is made aware of both the significance and constructedness of masculinity itself by taking the journey to Oz.

There is no way to know what might be the exact effects of this representation of feminized sissiness on a small child watching the film in the family home, be it shame, curiosity, giddiness, but one could speculate that the ways the film constructs the Lion as a viewed object might match the child's spatial relationships to fellow spectating family members. This duality (child viewed/child viewing) produces a kind of fragmentation of

Tinman, the Scarecrow, and Dorothy comfort the Cowardly Lion.

subjectivity for the child corresponding to the character's desire for wholeness.

CBS Television began its ritual broadcasts of the film in 1956, in an era when families were first purchasing televisions on which the film's sudden, radical shift to color could be appreciated. Before video allowed home screenings on demand, these broadcasts were annual, well-publicized events celebrating the family, the film, and the medium. If a child were watching the film in his living room, with his family present, then this spectating child's field of vision would include not only the image on the television but any family members sitting nearby. Any gender dictums of the culture (*Don't flit your wrists*) would be affirmed by the film, and this double field of vision for the spectating child would help enforce the prerogatives of the family and its relations.

I believe that this set of operations may duplicate two significant moments in the child's life. First, it reenacts the split in the mirror stage between mother and other when the child recognizes that it can be seen as an object by the mother's gaze in the mirror; and second, it may mirror the very moment of first-spectatorship. The childhood trauma of responding to certain stimuli which are designed to produce both a visible self and one marked as properly gendered (including a child's recognition of him/self as an object at the end of the film and his gender identification with the Lion) may first enter memory through shock defense, stored away and triggered involuntarily by a repeat viewing of *The Wizard of Oz*. That is, the child viewing the film may also at that moment be viewed by family members; the adult viewing the film may indulge in the collective spirit of the revival house, sharing memories

of first viewings. The film's performances would then negotiate these multiple identifications and operations for both the questioning child and any adult carrying the memory of childhood shame.

Oh it's sad, believe me, missy, When you're born to be a sissy Without the vim and voive

When I recently viewed the film with family members, my five-year-old and two-year-old nephews sat rapt in front of the television screen. Midway through the film, the four travelers reach the Emerald City and are treated to an extravagant spa excursion: restuffing, rebuffing, what seems to be a color consultation for Dorothy, and a full-on beauty-parlor makeover for the Lion. In the next scene, while waiting for the Wizard, Lahr's Lion launches into the comic centerpiece of the film, the narratively gratuitous, delightful song, "'f I Were King of the Forest." Visually, the Lion now features, in his words, "a new permanent just for the occasion" and, prominently, a big red ribbon in his coif. My five-year-old nephew announced to the family, with some discomfort, "It's a *girl* lion." When asked how he knew, Ben said, "Because of the red ribbon in his hair."

Psychoanalytic semiotics and common sense assure us that images both mean and resist meaning. What kinds of gender instability, to this or any child, are being signified through this or any film? Through what lens may we interpret this or any representation? Film historians such as Parker Tyler, Vito Russo, and Boze Hadleigh have written comprehensive historical analyses of representations of gays and lesbians in mainstream Hollywood films with divergent inflections. However, all operate relative to representation politics: how one is seen defines in many ways who one is.[3] That is, any given society's "ordering of reality" is dependent on the representations produced within that society. Taking a socio-historical stance, representation politics in the post-Stonewall era took on these stereotypes in the media, acknowledging that "typification is a near-necessity for the representation of gayness, the product of social, political, practical and textual determinations."[4] In their own ways, these writers and the gay rights movement they engage, produce, and critique are deeply invested in confronting negative stereotypes and equalizing the playing field of cultural representation. Certain questions will always remain: Are only positive representations desired? Are negative representations better than invisibility? How do spectators negotiate representation?

Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* is recognized as the definitive post-gay-liberation survey of homosexuality in the movies—starting with early silent shorts like Edison's experimental reel showing two of his male employees dancing; into the pre-Code 20s and 30s in which sissies were positive and likable, if nonsexual, comic figures; through the invisible years in which homosexual desire was buried under yards of heteronormativity; moving through pre-Stonewall-era films in which gays and lesbians were most often homicidal, suicidal, or both. His book, while using a studio PR shot of Lahr's Cowardly Lion as its frontispiece, never again mentions this prototypical Hollywood sissy, nor does it investigate the ideological and psychological effects of this representation on the family members who make up the film's intended audience. Rappaport, Tyler, Russo, and Hadleigh use wittily detached, emotionally recuperated, post-closet narrative voices to describe sissies; these rhetorically shrewd moves end up downplaying how the images themselves may have affected the construction as well as the supposed demolition of that closet for spectating children and adults. *The Celluloid Closet*'s powerful voice, for example, assumes that the negative connotation of the mincing-Lion publicity still speaks for itself and for the kind of dangerous stereotyping which visibility politics would ideally eradicate. But in making this significant point through the use of a damning studio still photo, Russo's book elides the ways in which the performance itself may negotiate with the representation over time, and with audiences of various ages and degrees of association with both the film and the closet. I find, alongside the shameful representation of the Cowardly Lion, a set of oppositional meanings also generated by Bert Lahr. This performative excess of sissiness produces a kind of discursive agency for alternative or queer readings.

Lahr came up through the vaudeville circuit, performing from the age of 15 and honing his comic personae and his "gnong gnong" into a profitable career. As much entrepreneurs of comedy as artists, the best vaudevillians learned how to negotiate racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes to get laughs and temper audience affections while surviving a brutal touring circuit.[5] Lahr in his day created several female characters (including Queen Victoria and a blushing mustachioed bride), and feminized masculinity surfaced regularly: one of his earliest vaudeville sketches is a flirtation scenario whose trick ending has Lahr exiting arm-in-

arm with another man, while a 1933 target was matinee idol and sissy archetype Clifton Webb.

For children watching *The Wizard of Oz,* and for the young at heart, the Lion as introduced is too butch to be true, a growling, fearless, action-oriented ("Who wants to fight me?") roughneck. Although exposed immediately as a sissy, the tough-guy performance is always just under the surface ("Ain't it da trut', ain't it da trut'"); indeed, the Lion's struggle in the film is to manage the sissy so the real man will prevail as the authentic. We first see this authentic male self in the Kansas reality section of the movie, in which Zeke declares he'll dog-bite Elvira Gulch, then saves Dorothy from falling into the pig trough. The other farmhands catch him being scared: "You're as scared as she is!" they tease. Their point here is not that he isn't a man (since he *did* rescue Dorothy), but that his body was caught expressing (womanly) fear. He is caught acting scared by the real men who may also feel this way but wouldn't dare show it. This fear that he may not be man enough to protect Dorothy, and may be caught displaying this fear, produces his character in Oz.

As my nephew determined, gender is performance, and for the Lion, the stakes of the performance are played out between the body expressed as real-man (fists clenched) and the body expressed as sissy (limp wrist). Not only is the Lion's gender expression regulated by the eyes of his friends, but he is also frequently caught in the gaze of a Wicked Witch who sees all in her magic lens. For the Lion, gender regulations are carried out through the spatial and discursive functions of Foucault's panopticon. The Lion cannot help but show everything: the sissy is always under the surface ready to be exposed, with emotional extremities that force the femininity out into the light, displayed to excess. The performance of the Lion's gender as a regulated fiction is in fact part of the delight taken by spectators, and Lahr's struggle to pass as masculine is at the very heart of the comedy. A further performative operation occurs for the Lion (and the Scarecrow, Tinman, and little girl) in which, according to poststructural theory, the interiority of the self is constructed in language. There is both an external and an internal system, constructed discursively, in which sex functions to maintain the illusion of the stable, gendered self. As Judith Butler points out, "'sex' becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access."[6] For the purposes of this discussion, we might call this pre-linguistic site, both literally and metaphorically, home.

Then I'm sure to get a heart,
— a brain, — a home, — the noive!

"Home"—for Dorothy, for the child viewing the film for the first time, and for the subject viewing the film in the Castro Theatre—is a term open to negotiation, especially for a viewer whose desire is to somehow conflate these fictional and real temporal sites in order to secure meaning for the term. For example, a Lacanian reflection on this home would remind us that the memories of first viewings, dreams of a liberated future home, as well as the film itself, all of which one might wish to situate in the realm of the imaginary, are actually symbolic constructions of language. For the politicized spectator in the Castro, this home swirls around the term "closet" and includes the promises of coming out. This particular home/closet conflation variously and arbitrarily denotes the psychoanalytic conditions and social space from which one comes out, or is reborn—be it the restricting homophobic kinship environs of the child's household, the public sphere in which arrest or battering might accompany any nonheterosexual act, or an internalized closet of shame. The material space after coming out, the where-you'll-find-me of the self-outed person, is by definition an undefined space, a potentially unlimited horizon. Freud's *heimlich* (which is familiar and congenial, which belongs to the house as well as what is concealed from sight) eventually coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich,* whose repression-compulsion effect is later experienced as the uncanny, "often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality." That a child may experience the film as being as real as life, and a fictional Oz as "realer" than Kansas, complicates Freud's conclusion that the uncanny loses its power in fiction "as soon as it is given an arbitrary and unrealistic setting."[7] And using a gender performativity model, the material home in which a child viewer lives may be one which, according to Judith Butler, operates under "certain gender norms which originate within the family and are enforced through certain familial modes of punishment and reward," and can be understood through certain theatrical discourses: "The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene."[8]

And, presumably, after one has left the scene. If, for Butler, home is the site where the fiction of gender becomes real-ized, for Salman Rushdie, Kansas is fiction, and nothing is realer than Oz, than the dreams of

a better future and the homes we construct after an anarchic break with both the past and the desire for a lost home. For Rushdie, the film expresses "the human dream of *leaving*," a hymn to elsewhere, of making a new life where there isn't any trouble. We are all migrants with the exile's desire for home; thus the film's concluding faith in the Kansas home (the "countervailing dream of roots") represents a discursive wrong turn.[9] Rushdie shares Butler's mistrust of placing faith in the fictions of the past. Given such overlapping discourses, this home would be a site compelling a revisit as an adult, in order to rearticulate within the field of the pre-linguistic performance. This compulsion to revisit the home in which gender-as-performance-style is constructed involves not just a sentimental trip down the Yellow Brick Road, but an attempt to disrupt the script into which one was born and to rearticulate the very terms of gender performance. But where? The site of this performance is impossibly located, impossibly defined, impossibly desired: there is, literally, *no* place like "home."

I believe that the film enacts an ontological struggle of terrifying force—a force which has the power to affect a child whose sense of himself, and himself in the world, is itself being formed. Child spectators, as well as the characters, search restlessly for their heart's desire, hoping to reconcile a yearning for a stabilized sense of self with a similar lack in the body. This search is marked by ongoing surveillance and the regulation of bodies by external forces; these bodies are constantly threatened, disappeared, sometimes even torn apart and reconstructed, as are many *real* homes. At the end of the film, once again, the spectator/character's sense of a unified self is simultaneously demolished and reassured: the Wizard, shown to be a sham, rewards the travelers with their medals and certificates, recuperating his and our identities by explaining that reality is a construction in language. The constructed reality of the film soon ends, and the child-spectator is left pondering just what it was about Oz which still matters, now that we are all back "home."

I wonder about myself as a kid, about this young gay boy, this "I," returned home at the end of the film; this "I" who has identified with the sissiness of the Lion, the desire not to be exposed as that sissy, the longing to be like the Scarecrow, and the very real fear of being torn apart by powerful, regulatory forces outside my home. I wonder what he/"I" made of the Wizard's final message to the Lion: "You are a victim of disorganized thinking," he begins. "You are confusing courage with wisdom. . . . For meritorious conduct, extraordinary valor, conspicuous bravery against wicked witches, I award you the triple cross." *Listen kid: Organize your thoughts. Don't confuse courage* (if you feel like it, just let your wrists go limp) *with wisdom* (nobody likes a sissy). *These things are worthy of a medal: meritorious conduct* (be a good boy), *extraordinary valor* (fight with your fists), *conspicuous bravery against wicked witches* (the best kind of bravery is the conspicuous kind).

Imagining the film's ending as I may have experienced it at five years old, I wonder about identification, and narrative reward. I imagine I identified, positively and negatively, with a Lion strong enough to get a laugh but unable to control the feminine gesture. And if the Lion was my troubled reality, the Scarecrow was certainly a gentle ideal; the Scarecrow is at most times all-over limp, yet in the end masculine (straight) enough to win Dorothy's heart. Unencumbered by excessive emotion like the Lion or a preoccupation with emotion like the Tinman, accepting without self-criticism that physical gawkiness is a part of life, the Scarecrow is brave and true to Dorothy, and trusts the power of the rational, all of which are, of course, qualities linked to the masculine. The Scarecrow is antidote to the Lion, one who can will himself to bravery through intellect and is rewarded, in the end, by the longest goodbye, the last farewell, the greatest display of emotion from Dorothy (as a girl, the appropriate bearer of emotion). In spite of the Lion's momentary bravery in melting the Witch, little boys are ultimately encouraged by the text to identify with the masculine (heterosexual) Scarecrow over the feminine (autresexual) Lion, and are rewarded by the narrative for this identification.[10] In this childhood battle between masculine and feminine embodiments, gestures, and inflections, which side wins?

And the sparrows would take wing If I, if I, were king . . .

Twenty-five years after this imagined first screening, I attended *The Wizard of Oz* at San Francisco's Castro Theatre. Seeing this movie at the Castro promised, ensured, a specific kind of crowd response. An 1,800-seat Art Deco movie palace located in the heart of the gay district, the Castro is known for campy revivals of Hollywood classics—raucous events featuring the spectacle of gay-identified viewers unafraid to respond viscerally. Screenings there produce a kind of

queer appropriation of classic film texts (here I use the term "queer" to mark "a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non-/anti-/contra-straight cultural production and reception.")[11] What I expected was a certain kind of expression: camp comedy, diva worship of Judy!, and, yes, I wanted to see if others remembered the film as I did, to test what my memory was.

This flexible space for expression took all the forms I imagined, from the liberation-cheers over Dorothy's "We're not in Kansas anymore" to the howls of laughter when Glinda the Good announces that "Only bad witches are ugly" to the seven-minute pageant of extravagant inverted heteronormativity that was the Munchkins to the subversive sexual in-jokes like the Scarecrow's unknowing "It's very tedious being stuck up here with a pole up your . . . back." But with the entrance of the Lion and the mention of the word sissy, I felt something else going on. I wondered how many others, like me, didn't realize as a child just how, well, *queeny* the Cowardly Lion was. I soon found out. Every mince, every wail, every operatic excess was greeted with roars of approval. Unlike my memory of the film as a child, the Lion's efforts to butch it up seemed gloriously futile, just as mine must have been growing up. The sissiness was produced with such comic zeal and bodily excess, and his attempts to feign masculinity failed so spectacularly, that lines like "My robe will be satin, not cotton, not chintz" played with the triumphant force of one who refuses to be limited by something as piddly as gender difference. Lahr even rearticulated the Lion's own limp-wrist gesture when getting his hair done in the Oz Salon, but this time he seemed to be triumphantly flouting the very conventions which held him back.

If the film text produced the sissy, the flexible space of expression of the Castro Theatre took the representation of sissy and, working in cahoots with Lahr's excess, butched it up, creating the Sissy Warrior, feminine gestures in place, trumpeting the celebratory constructedness of all identity and a refusal to behave by the ideological operations of gender. We were also shifting from a narrative- and apparatus-produced identification with the Scarecrow to the Lion, as a kind of corrective to the shame produced by the text, if not always the performance. The fact that Lahr-as-Lion himself could not be aware of this re-signification mirrors the lack of future awareness of the child; that this reading would be available only upon a repeat viewing in adulthood helps the viewer manage a lost childhood of closetedness, fear, and desire for expression. Because Lahr generously created a vaudevillian's across-the-footlights unspoken dialectic with the audience, the representation emerged anew with multiple performative properties. As a queer rearticulation of an ideologically suspect classic Hollywood text, the performance and the screening could serve as an attempted recuperation of personal memory.

What puts the "ape" in apricots?

For a child, the end of a film, any film, may be experienced as a kind of primary loss, a castration, a simulation of the original loss of the object (mother). Seeing a film again would be an attempt to recuperate the lost experience of the original viewing as well as the lost object of the mother. The return to this site promises not only coherence of what Kaja Silverman refers to as the "divisions and losses" which occur on the way to a child's emergence as a coherent cultural subject, it also promises a return to the *jouissance* and plenitude experienced before the child entered the symbolic in language.[12]

What desires compel these repeat viewings? Are these desires fulfilled? By whom? I have imagined a specific scene in which a *memoire involuntaire* is triggered through a tissue of subjective relationships to the senses; the scene is the one described above, in which a small child is watching *The Wizard of Oz* in the company of the family. In this scenario the child's identifications are conflated and fraught: aspects of identification with the object on the screen (the body of the Lion), are indiscernible from the object viewing the screen (the child) and being viewed (by family members).

A promised return to a (real or imagined) site of childhood longing is obviously part of the film's boundless charm. By any measure, *The Wizard of Oz* has produced among the most loyal and deep of empathic responses from cinematic spectators. The film's performances produce a delightful range of character indeterminacies as well as genre instabilities (is *The Wizard of Oz* more a lavish MGM musical? vaudeville-era comedy? reality-based horror film?). In moments when the narrative drive is suspended (the musical numbers, the clown routines, the horror sequences), the performers can be said to adopt certain genre characteristics: the Scarecrow is the male clown whose antics spectators enjoy but do not mimic, and Dorothy is the innocent victim whose melodramatic

tears rendered in her desire to "go home" may be matched by a spectator. While a clown doesn't produce mimetic body functions in spectators, a female melodramatic heroine may.[13]

But what about this Lion, who at times seems to be the masculine clown, available for detached laughter ("hippopotamus? I'd rip 'em from top to bottomous"), and at times exactly matches the excessive terrified response to the witch that a spectating child might (shaking, clutching at herself). This genre indeterminacy is also gender indeterminacy: Is the Lion a male clown or what Carol Clover has called a female horror-film "final girl"? In the film text, the Lion's masculinity is recuperated at the end by the Wizard, and by his own acknowledgement that the female excess was mostly just in his head. But to a young child questioning gender performance who both mimics the Lion's female excess and wishes to help save Dorothy from the Witch (as the Scarecrow pressures the Lion to do), the distinction between essential nature of gender and performance of gender may be an elusive one. The Lion would like to believe masculinity is just an act in his head. But it doesn't exactly work—after all, it is not the Lion but the Scarecrow, in the end, whom Dorothy will "miss most of all."

For the child, sexual difference is momentarily played out through a troubled identification with the object Cowardly Lion, and at the end of the film the child is thrown back on himself, but in direct opposition to the firm grasp rendered by severance. In other words, if the child experiences the body of the Lion as part of himself, and sexual difference is troubled at the end of the film, the child will be left with a *less* steady grasp on his own boundaries. It is this yearning I imagine propelling me back to the theater as an adult. It is this sense of fulfillment, of completeness, of recuperation, community, and peace that I remember washing over me in the theater. It is the lack of the object at the end of the film, it is this loss, which compels yet another repeat viewing . . . and this critique.

My nephew's disdainful comment, "It's a girl lion," came as Lahr performed the fantasy-fulfillment " 'f I were King of the Forest." If the impossibility of clear gender alignment put the small child in an unstable position, it played with celebratory fervor for the group of spectators at the Castro Theatre. This number produces a remarkable variety of excess: excess of narrative indeterminacy (the Lion's fantasy is that, as a king with "certain air of savoir-faire," he will possess both absolute male authority as well as absolute feminine refinement); gender instability (he claims he wants to be the King, but is acting like the Queen); as well as physical (in facial expressions and strutting) and vocal excess (in operatic trilling and mocking vocal inflections of both masculinity and dandyism). If the child watching the film laughed at or squirmed over the indeterminacies and excesses of the Lion in this number, the queens in the Castro Theatre celebrated the excess, shifting signification from embarrassment over the Lion's sissy-subjectivity to triumph of oppositional excess as the categories of sissy and sissy warrior were repeatedly, gloriously produced and unfixed. As the Sissy Warrior *this* Lion signified, not only would "each rabbit show their respect to me; the chipmunks genuflect to me," but "I'd show composh to every underling . . . 'f I, 'f I, were King."

Indulging in the fantasy of overturning the hegemonic ideology of heteronormativity, spectators at the Castro were encouraged to make a collective repositioning of the Lion, once signified by the text as "Cowardly." At the Castro, the Lion's gender alignment seemed not only an impossibility, it played like a futility, a huge joke, and a waste of time. Flying outside the regulatory radar screen of the text's sissy stereotype, Lahr's performance worked discursively to allow multiple and resistant readings; much of the giddy joy of the screening came from this willful misreading which refused the correctives of the film. The very real pressures to align oneself along visually determined gender lines remain nothing to laugh at; but there is therapeutic value in the recuperation of shame, and, possibly, political value in rearticulating representations of gender normativity whenever possible.

As an imitation of life, the Lion fails both as a Platonic ideal (as he is a contradictory, though charming, figure, possessing two things in himself—masculine wiles and feminine hysteria) and an Aristotelian character (as he is full of inconsistencies, relying on spectacle rather than incident). This makes him an ideal postmodern as well as queer subject. The Lion possesses many of the hysterical physical attributes ascribed to the feminine, but never loses his femininity or his excesses as the story unfolds—in fact, in a queer reading, it is the triumph of the feminine which operates to disrupt the negative mimetic properties of the production's shaming representation. But the Lion's desire lines up, I think, with a childhood desire for coherence, unity, and tradition of gender, and while certain unities are unraveled (e.g., masculinity), the desire for clear gender alignment is never fulfilled. This lack of clear gender alignment in a childhood reading produces the desire to

return to the site post-closet. The fulfillment of this desire would depend on achieving a state of consciousness which identity politics would ideally provide (i.e., coming out as a gay man); however, it is a subject position whose perception of stability post-structuralists would be keen to warn against.

Spectators at the Castro renegotiate the text's meanings, and seemingly become the final authors of the film. However, this free-ranging reclassification of the authorless text may itself be a kind of false consciousness, a false sense of a politicized, recuperated present masking an even more powerful operative force. The audience's waves of approval were also fraught: What were we all doing by inverting this representation's shaming mechanisms? After all, if the child/Lion can't recognize the operations of the panopticon, an organization which doesn't require an author to administer power, could we at the Castro be fully aware of the ideological fields of representation in which we so joyfully, so shamelessly, played?

Just as the machinery of the film (narrative drive, subjective identifications through apparatus) produces a sissy in the Lion, an alternative in the Scarecrow, and a set of "proper" responses to the gender instabilities for children watching the film, so does the machinery of the queerly read Castro screening produce another, equally proper, alternative to the sissy: the Lion as Sissy Warrior—talented enough to simultaneously mince and save the day—and woe to the spectator, straight or gay, who misses this re-reading. The film's regulatory phenomena which were turned against it in a triumphant way were the very same regulatory phenomena which produced the queer spectators in the Castro, variously gay or not. The Castro reading was authoritatively queer, and the ideal spectator queer, be he gay or not. The audience might therefore have included members who were both included (being gay) and excluded (not getting the inside jokes, or sensing an incomplete recuperation of childhood shame compared to others in the audience). In other words, the proper Castro reading, while celebratory, could also produce a gay subject more outside the queer reading experience than his straight, but with-it, fellow spectator.

What an adult spectator brought to the Castro Theatre may have been more than the conscious desire to reconfigure the film in spectacular, queer terms; this public event may have masked a more private, though collective, compulsion. The urge toward a group rearticulation of the film (we all, straight and gay alike, rearticulated the film in celebratory, queer terms) would hide another, less conscious need, another kind of impossibly desired, forever unfulfilled recuperation.

Home.

Ain't it da trut', ain't it da trut'

As adults—as irony-savvy, postmodern-reading adults—we crave genre indeterminacy, gender indeterminacy, any indeterminacy at all, feeling smart and sophisticated and adventurous enough to get the dry pop culture references and to engage with the disruptive narrative fissures of a film like *Pulp Fiction* as long as the film returns the viewer safely home, to the coffee shop, a bit shaken from the trip but smarter for having gotten the ride. Most films for children have their narrative structures securely in place, and, seemingly, so does *The Wizard of Oz* (it even has a built-in metaphor for narrative closure: getting home). But elements of the performances in *The Wizard of Oz* disrupt the safety of a causal narrative like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,* and these disruptive performances help produce the compulsion to return to the film, return to the site, and bind the narrative, somehow. A gay, straight, or questioning kid watching the film from that timeless place where gender is regulated daily in language (You throw the ball like a girl) watches all performances a little more closely (Is there anyone in the movie I can identify with, anyone doing it right, anyone not getting caught?). The closet by definition produces narrative panic: If kid homos end up pathetic, exposed, adult homos, how will my story end? The film's performances produce queer disjunctures, ruptures with classical narrative and viewer identification that a compelled re-viewing can attempt to manage. My re-viewing of *The Wizard of Oz* seemed a creation of performance space, a space of collective personal victory in the darkness of a movie theater, the recuperation of childhood self-surveillance through the appropriation of a classic Hollywood movie text and a rearticulation in spectators' bodies. To recognize the shock-of-recognition laughter of others as queer laughter was to own the darkness to which one had previously been abjected. To see *WOZ* at the Castro was to straddle memories of the closet and what felt like an uncomplicated, conscious awareness of a politicized present: it was a willful dance back into the closet—full of the darkest urges to be recognized and of dire prayers never to get caught.

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Notes

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1. The dovetail effect of Garland-as-gay-icon with Stonewall-as-birth-of-gay-liberation is described by historians and critics with a variety of inflections. In Annamarie Jagose's *Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), the death of Garland also represents a gay-liberationist abandonment of the homophile movement's tactics and cultural icons: "Stonewall functions in a symbolic register as a convenient if somewhat spurious marker of an important cultural shift away from assimilationist policies and quietist tactics, a significant if mythological date for the origin of the gay rights movement" (30). Neil Miller in *Out of the Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) sees the connection this way: "It was uncannily symbolic that the Friday the riots began was also the day of the funeral of the most beloved icon of the Boys in the Band gay culture that worshiped the tenacity of female entertainers like Garland but mirrored their helplessness as well" (367). Richard Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) contains a comprehensive essay on Garland's appeal for gay men in which her role as cultural icon in the era leading up to Stonewall is everywhere implied but the riots are not mentioned.
2. Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 16.
3. Tyler's *Screening the Sexes* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973; New York: De Capo Press, 1993), Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987, 1981), and Hadleigh's *The Lavender Screen* (New York: Citadel Press, 1993) deploy personal voices reflective of the social politics of the decades preceding the publication of each: the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Tyler's proto-queer study uses a personal, florid, intellectually vigorous voice, eschewing the political (and teasing gay liberationist politics for being reductive) and celebrating forms of individual sexuality over socialized gender roles. Russo avoids Parker's camp associations with a methodically argued, thoroughly researched study whose aim, in part, is to legitimize not "homosexuality" but the critical study of representational politics itself.
4. Dyer, p. 19.
5. See John Lahr's *Notes on a Cowardly Lion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969, 2000). According to his son and biographer, Bert's "wild carnival spirit, instinct for anarchy, and his resilience" (68), trademarks of his comic personality, were tempered by his humanity: "Comedy is sympathy," Bert Lahr said (38).
6. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 3.
7. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Collected Papers, Volume IV,* trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 398, 406.
8. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre,* ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 277.
9. Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), p. 23.
10. The Lion's nascent feminized desire (which has no clear object) stands in opposition to the Scarecrow's nascent normalized desire (arguably fixed on Dorothy). Without a proper object of sexual desire (the Lion obviously likes Dorothy, but the Scarecrow seems to have a crush on her), the Lion is marked as an adolescent sissy boy, feminine, yet not asexual (since he is all about desire). I am here unsatisfied with the terms "homosexual" or "gay," suggesting as they do determinable sexual object choice, and I find the resistant nature of the term "queer" unable to properly connote the ways in which the film succeeds in neutering the Lion—in the film the Lion is both queerly other-ed and desexualized. I coin the term "autresexual" as a placeholder to help me write about a representation which is sexualized as well as disturbingly bereft of sexuality; for a spectating child, the Lion's desire is literally all dolled up with nowhere to go.
11. Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 3. In his recent *Flaming Classics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), Doty revisits the film, arguing that it is primarily and foremost a queer text and that it is straight or mainstream readings that are "appropriative."
12. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 8.
13. This argument follows Linda Williams' essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," in *Film Theory and Criticism,* 5th Edition, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), in which she argues that the forms of bodily excess displayed in the "low" genres of pornography, horror, and female melodrama are spectacular displays of ecstasy, terror, and weeping, respectively. The display of the sensational body marks the films as belonging to non-classically-Hollywood film genres such as thrillers, musicals, and comedies, terms under which *The Wizard of Oz,* in moments, operates. But Williams also points out that in those genres, the display of bodily excess is not "deemed gratuitously excessive, probably because the reaction of the audience does not mimic the sensations experienced by the central clown." However, in the case of the horror film, the female melodrama, and pornography, "the success of these genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen" (704).

Linda Williams

MELODRAMA IN BLACK AND WHITE

Uncle Tom and *The Green Mile*

Like many people who turned on their televisions to watch the October 3, 1995 verdict in the trial of O.J. Simpson, I felt implicated—by both gender and race—in its melodrama. Though I wanted to think I was angry simply that a man had gotten away with murder, there was no separating my anger on that account from the fact that it was a black man who had seemed to get away with this crime and that it was a white woman he had killed. There was no isolating gender outrage from racial outrage. From the moment I became angry at O. J., I was implicated in a dialectic of racial sympathy and antipathy running through American culture and going back at least as far as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The flip side of this antipathy was the sympathy I had felt for Rodney King, the black man who almost three years earlier had so visibly been the victim of white police violence.

While I was caught up in what felt like positive racial sympathy for the suffering black man in my reactions to the King verdict, I was also caught up in negative racial antipathy in my reaction to the Simpson verdict. Each of these trials encapsulated a powerful moving picture—in one case, that of a white woman suffering at the hands of a black man, and in the other, a black man suffering at the hands of white male police. In American popular culture, these two antithetical moving pictures have been chasing each other around for a long time in a complex dialectic of feeling. To trace the mass culture genealogy of black and white racial melodrama over the last 150 years is to recognize that these raced and gendered movements to sympathy and antipathy are the very bedrock of American popular culture. I call this bedrock the American melodrama of black and white.[1]

Looking back at Uncle Tom from the vantage point of Rodney King and O.J. Simpson, it becomes clear that an emotionally charged "moral legibility" so crucial to the mode of melodrama is intrinsically linked to a "racial legibility" that habitually sees a Manichaean good or evil in the supposed visual "fact" of race itself—whether it is the dark male victim of white abuse or the blonde female victim of black sexual aggres-

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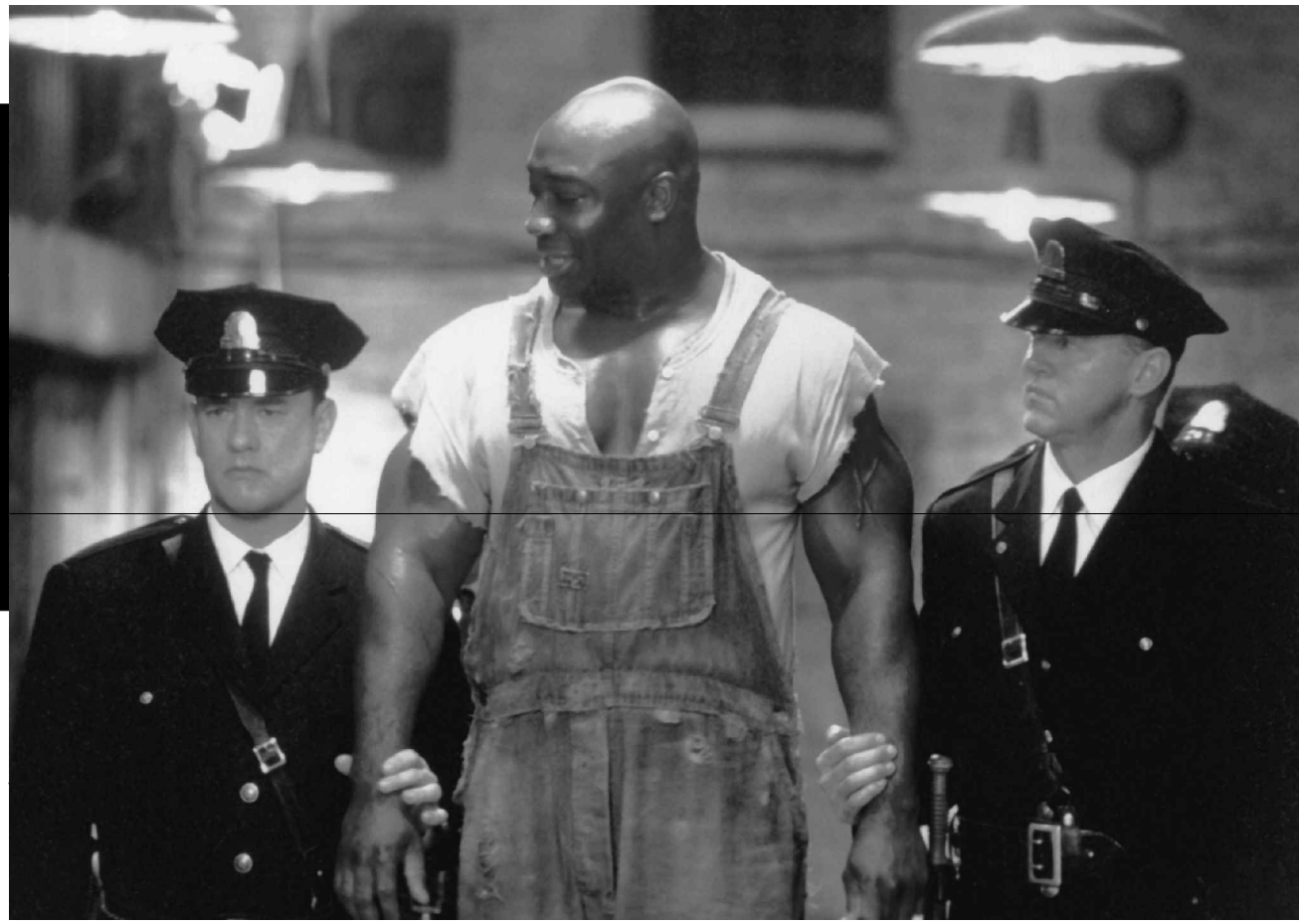

Tom Hanks (left), Michael Clarke Duncan (center), and David Morse (right) walk "the mile."

sion. While the spectacle of Uncle Tom's suffering at the whip of the white slave driver Simon Legree had once functioned progressively to "humanize" the figure of the slave, the romantic racialism of this negrophilia had humanized him in his very blackness. By the same token, the sympathy I felt for Nicole Simpson, and which I wanted to believe was "race neutral" —uncontaminated by any pre-existing scripts of racial pity or antipathy—could not be untangled from a virulent strand of negrophobia that was inextricably connected to a cycle of racial melodrama begun by the antebellum Uncle Tom and "answered" by the Progressive era's *The Birth of a Nation*.

Leslie Fiedler once provocatively dubbed the dialectic between these two scenarios as epics of "pro-Tom" sympathy and "anti-Tom" antipathy.[2] His terms are still useful in that they show us how these works speak to the culture's most utopian hopes, as well as its most paranoid delusions, about race and gender. Fiedler is wrong, however, to call these works epics, for they are more comprehensible as melodramas, a form that has been insufficiently understood as a major force of emotionally based ethical reasoning in American mass culture.

The O.J. Simpson murder trial and the previous trial of the police in the beating of Rodney King which so informed it were such galvanizing experiences for Americans of all races, genders, and ethnicities because there was no race neutral, unmelodramatic—or, in Fiedler's terms, no non-"pro-Tom" or non-"anti-Tom"—way of seeing them. Morally, one had to decide, with each day's new twist of evidence, who was the racial victim and who the racial villain of these racially saturated scripts. This is not to say, however, as many critics of the Simpson verdict have said, that a pure "colorblind" justice was perverted by the calculated invocation of racialized ways of seeing. Rather, it is to say that from the very beginning of this tradition, the quest for justice has depended upon the application of a melodramatic "Tom lens," with a habit of seeing virtue in the suffering of the black male body at the hands of white villains and in that of the white

female body at the hands of black villains. In the trial of the police in the beating of Rodney King, this habit of viewing collided with an equally melodramatic "anti-Tom lens" capable of seeing every movement of the black male body as a potential assault on white law and order. Similarly, in the Simpson trial, the alleged attack on the blonde white woman by the jealous black ex-husband invoked an "anti-Tom" lens that immediately racialized the case, as in the infamous darkening of the mug shot of O.J. Simpson as soon as he became a suspect. This racial vilification then collided, in its turn, with a predominantly black jury's perception that every movement of the white police was an effort to frame the black defendant.

These are exaggerated, delusional, and paranoid racial fantasies that deploy race, even in their most utopian moments, in the most regressive ways possible. For good reason, many thinking people have done their best to resist the lurid confluence of these two trials, to resist being sullied by the commodified frenzy that was O. J. But it is useful to trace the genealogy of black and racial melodrama from a time when white (and male) meant American to a time when that term has come to include diverse races, genders, and ethnicities, not in order to celebrate a progress of inclusion, but to show instead how basic the melodramatics of racial suffering has been to the very process of citizenship in American history.

To "feel good" is not to feel happy, but to feel appropriately identified with the suffering of the black saint . . .

In considering the confluence of racialized affect in the two race trials mentioned above, we can see that what was happening in the interpenetration of the O. J. Simpson trial with the previous King trial was nothing less than the evolution of the ongoing melodrama of black and white adapted now to the very form of an American jury trial in which verdicts could generate new forms of sympathy and antipathy across and within races. The new entertainment form of the race trial has almost come to usurp fictional filmic courtroom racial melodrama in popularity. Who needs *To Kill a Mockingbird* when we have these true-life trials? Nevertheless, the fictional courtroom race melodrama persists, and it deserves new attention in the wake of the national trauma of the 90s "trials in black and white."

Two recent films suggest ways in which the Tom variation of black and white melodrama continues to be determining of the way mass culture America talks to itself about race: *The Hurricane* (Norman Jewison, 1999) is a literal courtroom drama that climaxes in a verdict of not guilty delivered on appeal to the long-incarcerated middleweight boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, falsely convicted of murder in 1967 and not exonerated until 1985. *The Hurricane* operates in the *Roots* tradition of the proud, self-reliant, seething black man, aggressively rewriting both Tom docility and the paranoid white fantasy of anti-Tom threat. *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont, 1999) is about a black man also falsely convicted and incarcerated, and ultimately executed. It is the fictional story, based on a Stephen King serial bestseller, of a seven-foot-tall black giant awaiting execution on death row in a Louisiana penitentiary in 1935. John Coffey (Michael Clarke Duncan) is to be put to death for the rape and murder of two little blonde sisters found bloodied in his arms. Although the film does not actually show the trial that convicts the black man, it replays alternate versions of the evidence, putting the audience in the position of an ideal jury. We are privileged to learn, however—as the jury did not—the truth of Coffey's innocence and the circumstances that convicted him. *The Green Mile* is thus a trial movie without a trial, a film structured by an adversarial spinning of stories from defense and prosecutorial points of view.[3]

Both films are in the mainstream of the negrophilic Tom tradition—that is, in the tradition that privileges sympathy for the unjust suffering of black victims. One film shows righteous black anger at the system; another shows a Christ-like and Tom-like black acceptance of racial injustice. Taken together, they can both be seen to address the problem of an all-white justice that prefers to frame, or accept circumstantial evidence of, black male guilt rather than investigate white evil, as if to remind us, in the wake of the resentful white backlash against the Simpson verdict, that it is white juries who have carried out the vast majority of miscarriages of justice. Rubin Carter and his fan, John Artis, are framed for the murder of whites in a New Jersey bar; the true villain is a New Jersey detective

who is the embodiment of Mark Fuhrman-style race hatred. This detective first arrests Carter as a juvenile offender and then proceeds to hound him for the rest of his life, eventually framing Carter for murder. The bulk of the film concerns the long incarceration and the courtroom melodramas that finally freed the falsely accused Carter.

In *The Green Mile,* Paul Edgecomb (Tom Hanks), the condemned man's kindly jailor/executioner, pays a visit to the attorney who defended John Coffey. In a harrowing scene, this attorney (Gary Sinise), who at first appears to be a just man, launches into a story of a mongrel dog. The dog is likened to a "niggra" that you keep around "because you think it loves you." At the end of the interview the attorney dramatically reveals the mutilated face of his young son, once bitten by such a mongrel dog. At this point it suddenly becomes clear that the fair-minded, loving father who defended Coffey is also a hate-filled racist who believes fervently that "niggras" are dogs. Thus both films pin their unjust verdicts on administrators of justice whose race hatred forms part of a personal vendetta against the animality of black men. And both films pose the question of whether interracial love is possible in the midst of such villainous white racism.

In the bitter aftermath of the Rodney King and O.J. Simpson trials, the question of how blacks and whites feel toward one another is very much on the agenda of both these films so earnestly devoted to some sort of racial healing. "Hate put me in prison," says Rubin Carter to the young black man working with three liberal white Canadians for his release. "Love's gonna bust me out." Love in this film is both interracial (it includes the white Canadians) and intra-racial (it features the troubled black youth who adopts Carter as a surrogate father). *The Hurricane* thus operates both to express and to soothe black anger by showing that there is both race hatred *and* selfless interracial love. It also operates to soothe white guilt by showing that white justice can correct its errors and cancel out the hate of the rogue cop.

Both films thus answer the question of the possibility of interracial love in the Tom tradition of affirmation. *The Hurricane* presents the familiar post-*Roots* revision of Tom's Christ-like docility in the figure of the proud, righteously angry black man who, like Kunta Kinte, resists becoming a docile slave. In Denzel Washington's assured and underplayed Academy Award-nominated performance we appreciate the ultimately futile effort Carter makes to cut himself off from the love of family and friends on the outside in order to be hard enough to survive on the inside. In contrast, however, *The Green Mile* anachronistically embraces the Christlike docility of the Tom figure. So how is it possible, in 1999, in the aftermath of both the King beating and the Simpson trial, that a film which reinvents the meek Tom stereotype in the body of a seven-foot, 300-lb, hypermasculine giant should capture the imagination of American audiences in a way that the true story of Hurricane Carter's incarceration and exoneration did not? How do we understand the anachronism of this return to Tom, arguably the most popular story and iconography of nineteenth-century American culture, in the form of a courtroomless courtroom melodrama? For John Coffey's complete lack of anger toward the system that executes extends in a direct line from the Tom tradition. Why, in other words, in an era in which the figure of the Tom has been so thoroughly discredited by blacks and whites alike, has such a kindly but ignorant Tom-like hero been resuscitated in the body of a black giant? I think the answer is not simply that anxious white American audiences still need to be reminded of the humanity of black Americans in the same way that they once learned this lesson through the Christ-like docility of Uncle Tom. Rather, a reconfigured version of the Tom scenario still seems to be necessary to perform the "moral legibility" so important in melodrama's recognition of virtue.[4] Indeed, moral legibility becomes allied with racial legibility as race melodrama strains to see a Manichaean good or evil in the apparent visual "fact" of race itself. In this case, Coffey's virtue and docility, in conjunction with his hypermasculine physicality, work to allow the film (and King's novel) safely to reenact all the worst anti-Tom scenarios of the paranoid white racist imagination in order to disavow them. It is remarkable, in fact, just how often Coffey's virtue puts him in a position of reenacting all the worst anti-Tom fantasies of black sexual threat.

Consider Coffey's miracles. The first occurs after he has been incarcerated in Edgecomb's death-row cell block. Edgecomb, who takes his duty of conducting smooth and swift executions seriously, and who anachronistically displays no prejudice against his seven-foot-tall black prisoner, suffers from a painful urinary infection. Coffey lures Edgecomb to his cell and grabs him in what at first appears to be a sexual attack, placing his hand on Edgecomb's crotch. The light grows brighter, and something magical passes between Coffey and his jailor, leaving Coffey with the pain and suffering that was once Edgecomb's. Coffey then emits the evil humors of the illness in the form of a large

swarm of insects from his mouth. Whatever his miraculous healing power consists of, it requires Coffey to embrace the pain, to "take it back," to absorb the pain into his own capacious body, then to emit it orally, in a grand Stephen King coup de théâtre, as swarming insects. Soon Edgecomb urinates with enormous relief and, in a comic sequence not found in King's novel, makes love to his wife no less than four times that night, later coyly telling Coffey that his missus was pleased by his cure, "several times." Thus potency passes from the black man to the white through this ritual "laying on of hands." If love—both the desire for and the fear of interracial love—is one of the important questions that black and white racial melodrama is "talking to itself " about, then *The Green Mile* is the film that seems to most strenuously want to prove, as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did before it, the virtue of a selfless, uncarnal black love. It does so, however, by placing its black and white bodies in the most compromising positions, enacting, in this case, the same interracial homoerotic fear it wishes to disavow.

Consider, for example, the staging of the film's next miracle. Realizing that Coffey is more saint than sinner, Edgecomb concocts a plan for him to cure the brain tumor of the warden's wife. This tumor has transformed her from a sweet-tempered woman into a foul-mouthed harridan. Audaciously springing Coffey from death row late one night, Edgecomb drives him in a truck to the warden's home. Facing down the warden's shotgun, Edgecomb leads Coffey to the bedridden victim, who looks frail and innocent with her long blonde hair and white nightgown. She greets him at one moment with obscenity—"Don't come near me, big fucker!"—at another moment with kindly sympathy for his scarred arms. Coffey kisses her forehead and then her mouth, reenacting every white racist's worst fears of the black sexual attack on the white woman. This sexless interracial kiss seems to want to master prophylactically the white man's fear of black man's sexual threat to "his" woman. Like the compromising touch to Tom Hanks's penis, the kiss disavows the very forbidden desire it enacts, asserting transcendent purity in the face of lurid, interracial carnality.

"Sucking" up all the woman's pain—and in the process her "dirty" mouth—into his own mouth, Coffey works his miracle under the kindly gaze of Edgecomb and the astonished gaze of the warden. The house shakes, the woman's appearance changes, and another cure is accomplished. Now it is the wife's turn to initiate contact: she walks over to Coffey, places her St. Christopher medal around his neck, and, reaching way up, embraces him. Once again, the kind of contact that would drive a conventional white racist to murder is provocatively offered up under the guise of a sublime form of transcendent love.

This melodramatic spectacle of the black man embracing the pain of whites in the most compromising of ways is repeated several times throughout the film, exceeding even Uncle Tom's always potentially incendiary interracial sympathy for Little Eva. Indeed, it is worth asking why it is that American audiences, apparently both black and white, have chosen to warm their hearts with this story of a black man on death row who suffers mightily, and who does so by acting out so many scenarios of apparent sexual assault, in the end only to cure his jailor and then the warden's wife. Something more important is going on than the assertion that black prisoners on death row can sometimes be innocent.

Coffey's miracles entail repeated, ritualistic, prophylactic enactments of interracial sexual threats that ultimately function to master white fear and paranoia. In this fantasy, the white woman becomes the sexually obsessed harridan that the white man fears she might become if corrupted by the black man's carnality. But—miracle of miracles—it is precisely the contact with that black flesh that cures the woman of her carnality. Neither a threat to the white man's phallic power nor to the white woman's purity, John Coffey's miracles are there to prove—his defense attorney's claim to the contrary—that the "mongrel" will not screw his master's wife or rape his children.

The film's final miracle is not another cure, but—in this courtroomless courtroom drama—it provides miraculous insight into the circumstantial evidence that convicted Coffey. Inadvertently touching the condemned man in the next cell, Coffey has a vision that allows him to see that it is this man who committed the crimes for which he himself is about to be executed. Coffey then uses his powers to orchestrate the premature execution of this condemned man at the hand of a villainous guard. By way of explanation, Coffey then offers Edgecomb his hand, and through this touch Edgecomb attains a true vision of the crime in a cinematic flashback that the film audience now sees as well. We learn that what had looked like the rape and murder of two young white girls was another attempt by Coffey, this time failed, to "take it back."

So much for the black love, and rescue, of whites. What about the reciprocal white love, and rescue, of blacks, the kind of love that saved Rubin Carter? Having ascertained Coffey's innocence, what does Paul

Edgecomb do to prove *his* love to the black man? This is where an already strange film gets even stranger. When Edgecomb asks Coffey if he wants to run away, Coffey, like Uncle Tom, has no interest in escape. Escape is futile to a saint fatigued by life's ugliness. It thus remains for Edgecomb to make himself and the audience "feel good" about this execution. To "feel good" is not to feel happy, but to feel appropriately identified with the suffering of the black saint and thus, melodramatically, to recognize one's own. This recognition of virtue does not necessarily mean feeling morally exempt from any culpability in the process—we learn that Edgecomb will quit his job soon after and will suffer life-long guilt for his deed. However, through the jailor's sympathetic suffering with the condemned man, we—like Coffey—are invited to forgive the violence of the execution. For we are led to believe that if anyone else had carried it out, it would have hurt more.

Edgecomb's first act of sympathy is to ask Coffey what he can do to make him happy before he dies. In a departure from the novel, Darabont's film has him answer, "Ain't never seen me a flicker show." Cut to John Coffey, open-mouthed in reverent awe before the image of Fred and Ginger singing, "Heaven, I'm in heaven . . ." in the "Cheek to Cheek" number from *Top Hat*. Backlit from the projector beam, sitting alone in the prison auditorium, John Coffey murmurs, "Angels, just like up in heaven." Instead of escape, Coffey is given Depression-era cinematic escapism. He will now be ready to die happy if he can only negotiate the trials of the electrocution itself. Electrocution, "with love," operates in this film much like the last-minute legal rescue that frees Rubin Carter. The greater or lesser humanity of this execution thus becomes the sole arena with which we are to measure the white virtue of John Coffey's jailors.

Because the procedures of execution by electrocution have become familiar over the course of this nearly three-hour film (which features no less than three excruciatingly detailed examples, one of which is horribly botched due to the sadism of one of the guards), we are thus in a position to judge a "good" as opposed to a "bad" execution. Indeed, the very fact that we are invited to make such distinctions suggests the degree to which this film is reconciled to the inevitability of innocent black suffering. John Coffey's execution will prove to be "good." However, the very fact that we are engaged in such judgments at a time when the death penalty is under attack for having put to death a disproportionate number of innocent black men—as DNA evidence is rapidly proving—suggests that this film is addressing deeper levels of white guilt than the execution of one black saint in Louisiana.

When Coffey first enters the electrocution chamber he cringes, losing his nerve before the hate exuded by the family of his supposed victims. But Edgecomb and his team of loving, professional executioners tell him to feel *their* love instead. With this love Coffey can proceed to withstand his execution. When asked if he has anything to say, he apologizes, not for what he has done, since he is innocent, but "for what I am"—by which we can only imagine that he means a black giant whose very bodily existence frightens paranoid white racists. When it is time to put on the hood that will cover his face, Coffey again shows fear—like a little child, he is afraid of the dark. Edgecomb's next kindness is to leave off the hood, his one small act of resistance to state protocol. The execution then takes place, with Edgecomb and his men hiding their tears.

What are we to make of such an interracial act of violence in the name of interracial love?

What are we to make of such an interracial act of violence in the name of interracial love? It is as if Master George, at the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* not only failed to rescue Uncle Tom, but wielded Simon Legree's whip in the final beating—with love. It is also as if the relative kindness or brutality of that whiplash were now the only possible measure of white virtue. We are meant to see that what looks like evil—white guards in a Louisiana prison operating an electric chair to execute an innocent black man—is, no less than Coffey's apparently violent embrace of the two raped and murdered white girls, a melodramatic misrecognition of virtue.

This is not the first time mainstream black and white melodrama has posed the spectacle of black punishment by white authority as a disguised form of kindness. In a key moment of the final episode of the

television adaptation of *Roots,* when the kindly and incongruously innocuous white friend whips Chicken George's son, Tom, he is presented as doing so only in order to prevent a more brutal whipping from a racist nightrider. With friends like these we might say that black men in these negrophilic versions of the melodrama of black and white hardly need enemies. This revision of the classic icon of the black man beaten by the white villain operates in marked contrast to the sadistic, vengeance-seeking crackers who taunt Coffey and tell him they hope it hurts. These loving professionals hate their job but do it anyway. Either way, the black man gets beaten and executed. The lesson for the black onlooker may very well be that white love, no less than white hate, is lethal.

How a still-majority white America is to carry out the incarceration and execution of more and more African-American men while still feeling virtuous seems to be the deeper issue at stake in this new twist on the "trial" movie produced in the wake of 90s "trials in black and white."[5] O. J. Simpson's not-guilty verdict, no less than Rubin Carter's, has proven to be the great exception to the rule of black incarceration and execution. As we have seen, the courtroom melodrama of *The Hurricane* belatedly rescues the falsely accused black man so that we can believe in the possibility of racial justice. The tellingly more popular and much more outlandish fantasy of *The Green Mile* enacts a different kind of rescue: it rescues white Americans from the guilt of putting the innocent black man to death. Both films are designed to deliver the twin morals spoken aloud in *The Hurricane*: that "not all white people are racists" and that "not all black people are murderers"—feeble liberal lessons attempting to answer the resentments raised by the King and Simpson trials.

We can legitimately ask why, in *The Green Mile,* John Coffey is never seen working his miracles for fellow African Americans, only for whites. Even Uncle Tom suffered for the sin of aiding his fellow slaves. We can ask, for both films, why it is not the justice system but only the personal villains who are exposed, when surely the pressing issue before the nation is how to introduce real "moral legitimacy" into a thoroughly unequal system of justice. We can also ask why it is not possible to tell a story that situates the black man somewhere in between Rubin Carter's righteous anger and John Coffey's apology for being who he is. But we already know that the reason is melodrama in general, and Tom and anti-Tom melodrama in particular. Melodrama, as the very logic of the excluded middle, cannot tell the story of the middle ground. We have seen over and over that a predominantly white America needs to believe in its own virtue vis-à-vis either the extreme suffering or the extreme villainy of the black male body. Much in both of these films is thus predictable.

What is striking in *The Green Mile,* however, is the remarkable extent to which the establishment of white virtue rests upon a paradoxical administration of pain and death to the black body so that white people may weep. What was true in the mid-nineteenth century is thus strangely true today. If the Tom melodrama has always wanted to see the black man's love as the special cure for the white man's hate—even the very hate that kills him—this latest incarnation of the melodrama of black and white offers a new twist: it stages the worst fears of anti-Tom race hatred in the guise of the expression of Tom love. Perhaps because we are much more familiar with the purer stagings of either pro-Tom love or anti-Tom threat, it is difficult to untangle the threads of both in this particular film. But there is no other testament to the endurance of both the Tom and the anti-Tom traditions of racial love and racial hate than the popularity of this apparently anachronistic film.

The lesson for the black onlooker may very well be that white love, no less than white hate, is lethal.

Black and white racial melodrama, like melodrama itself, has a strange way of renewing itself for each new age. There is much to deride in this Manichaean dance of victims and villains as it continues into the new millennium. My goal, however, is neither to rehabilitate the mode of melodrama nor even to weigh in on one side or the other of the "black and white" resentments about race. Rather, just as the Simpson verdict showed me how I, as a white woman, have been implicated in the raced and gendered dimensions of this discourse, I consider it sufficient for the moment to recognize its almost incalculable influence on Amer-

ican attitudes toward race. We need to trace the genealogies of a story and an iconography that is central to the "moral legibility" of race in American culture. The study of black and white racial melodrama has the potential to explain why it is that in a democracy ruled by rights, we do not gain the moral upper hand by saying simply that rights have been infringed. We say, instead, much more powerfully: "I have been victimized; I have suffered, therefore give me rights." To understand racial melodrama is to see why repeated calls for more accurate, or more "realistic" representations of racially marked characters are powerless to overturn deeply embedded racial stereotypes that seem hopelessly outmoded, yet live on in the culture. Until we understand the melodramatic imagination that these stereotypes serve, and the historical dynamic of its popular cycles, we will never grasp why we are compelled to feel for the raced and gendered sufferings of some and to hate the raced and gendered villainy of others.

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Notes

1. There is an extended analysis of black and white race melodrama in my book *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001). This essay is adapted from the conclusion to that book.
2. Leslie Fiedler, *What Was Literature: Class Culture and Mass Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).
3. Carol Clover has offered a fascinating commentary on the importance of the adversarial structure of Anglo-American law and the entertainment form of the trial movie it has generated, which makes Americans, as she puts it, "a nation of jurors." This is the case even in what Clover elsewhere calls "courtroomless" courtroom dramas—dramas in which trials do not take place but in which the audience is still treated like a jury (unpublished manuscript [1998, p. 272]).
4. These terms are borrowed from Peter Brooks' influential study of nineteenth-century melodrama, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976). Brooks argues that melodrama is a form that seeks to articulate transcendent forms of pure good and evil in a "post-sacred" modern world that no longer believes fully in transcendence (15).
5. I discuss the form and function of these trials as forms of melodramatic entertainment in a chapter of *Playing the Race Card* called "Trials in Black and White."

Jennifer Holt

In Deregulation We Trust

The Synergy of Politics and Industry in Reagan-Era Hollywood

The Synergy of Politics and Industry

The 1980s mark a period of pivotal transformation for Hollywood—one that was as significant as the end of the studio era, if not more so. It was during this time that new technologies redefined the industrial economy and new delivery systems transformed the media landscape. At the same time, a wave of intense mergers and consolidation rolled through the industry, and the major studios returned to a structural economy of vertical integration after almost 40 years of government-enforced divestiture. While most of these developments have been analyzed at length, the process of vertical reintegration still remains somewhat obscured. After all, throughout President Reagan's second term the studios and their parent companies acquired exhibition outlets again, recreating the corporate structure that was dismantled by the court in the 1948 *Paramount* decision. By the end of Reagan's tenure in office, the major studios or their parent companies owned almost the same percentage of the country's theaters that the "Big Five" held prior to the *Paramount* consent decrees.

Most of the seismic shifts that shook the industrial landscape during the 1980s can be understood in terms of synergy, a concept that took on enormous importance in Hollywood during this period. Synergy has been used to describe "the commercial possibilities of mutually locking commercial ventures,"[1] "tight diversification,"[2] or "a belief that one plus one could equal three."[3] Synergy was the foundational principle upon which vertically integrated entertainment conglomerates were built during the 1980s in order to exploit the rapidly collapsing boundaries between film, television, and cable, and between production, distribution, and exhibition outlets.

I would also maintain that there was another type of synergy taking place in Hollywood during this era: that which occurred between the film industry and the American political climate. The partisan nature of antitrust enforcement and media regulation, along with the many interconnected political and economic imperatives of Reagan's policies, was intimately linked with the manner in which the industry was able to reorganize. Of course, the deregulatory trend affected nearly all sectors of the economy, but developments specific to Hollywood and Washington at this time rendered the two particularly responsive to and supportive of one another. Consequently, the vertically integrated corporate structure of Hollywood that was once the

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subject of intense government scrutiny and anti-trust litigation was reestablished with not only the endorsement but also the assistance of the same federal courts, and was ultimately sanctioned by Reagan's Department of Justice. The FCC, FTC, Justice Department, and even President Reagan himself delivered numerous victories to the film industry during the 1980s, fueling a mighty reconstruction that reshaped the business in an era of insecurity and instability.

Hollywood's Industrial Landscape

The 1980s was an era of ebb and flow, ultimately characterized by consolidation (in terms of ownership) and expansion (in terms of production and revenue). This realignment essentially propelled the "New Hollywood" industrial economy into existence. The growing reliance on blockbuster filmmaking initially made the business significantly more unstable. The well-documented *Heaven's Gate* fiasco that nearly destroyed United Artists in 1981 was an ominous example of the enormous risks associated with this mode of production and the increased volatility of Hollywood's infrastructure during this period—especially in the early 1980s.

While costs steadily rose during the 1970s due to the changing nature of the product, rising inflation and interest rates, increased overhead, star salaries, and special effects, the number of productions steadily declined. In 1980, 233 features were released, and by 1982, projects in development with the major studios had dropped 53 percent from the previous year.[4] However, after producing an all-time low of 169 films, the industry began an incredible acceleration that lasted throughout the latter half of the decade. By 1989, thanks largely to an expansion in independent production embraced by the studios' distribution machinery, the number of American releases had skyrocketed to 501—a rise of 115 percent over 10 years and the largest number of releases since 1942. Total box-office gross climbed from $2.7 billion in 1980 to over $5 billion by decade's end.[5] The majors also maintained a lock on the market; throughout the 1980s, the eight largest companies accounted for an average of 90 percent of the domestic market share.[6]

A huge wave of theater construction also began in the early 1980s, and by 1986 the number of U.S. screens had grown 44 percent from just ten years earlier. The decade began with 17,590 theater screens and topped the 20,000 mark for the first time in 1984.[7] That same year, *Star Trek III* opened in a record 1,966 theaters, demonstrating that as exhibition space grew throughout the decade, so did the scope of release patterns. By the end of the 1980s, there were 23,132 screens spread across America's malls and multiplexes, and mega-productions like *Batman* opened on 2,100 of them, or in nearly 10 percent of the country's prime theaters.[8] Consequently, the rising number of prints needed for the expanding number of screens and growing wide release also contributed to the increase in production costs during the 1980s.

In 1984, industry revenues were still led by domestic theatrical rentals (43 percent), followed by ancillary markets (35 percent) and foreign film rentals (22 percent).[9] By 1985, ancillary revenue (including pay TV, network TV, and videocassette sales) had risen to over 50 percent and domestic theatrical had dropped to 36 percent.[10] There was a recession at the box office throughout the year that sent exhibitors into a panic. Much of the drop-off was attributed to the rise of home video, as box-office revenue was at the lowest levels in nine years, and in late 1985 VCR sales were at their highest ever. It was reported that the teenage social and courting ritual of going to the movies was rapidly being replaced by "VCR dates," and this all-important age group reduced their film attendance by 20 percent in 1985, while tripling their video rentals.[11] Theater owners were still insisting on a minimum window of six months between theatrical and home video release, "regardless of a picture's success or failure at the box office."[12]

By 1986, however, home video had become the industry's chief revenue source. This market was now providing distributors with about $2 billion and outstripping theatrical revenues ($1.6 billion) for the first time.[13] Projected revenue from home video was also increasingly being used by Wall Street analysts as a tool for appraising future stock values of the major film companies, elevating the stature and importance of this exhibition window.

Moreover, while the American film industry had always looked abroad for sources of revenue, the global focus of Hollywood was also amplified in this period. Overseas theatrical and video markets exploded during the second half of the decade: between 1984 and 1986, Hollywood's European exports alone jumped 225 percent to reach $561 million annually.[14] In some major European markets, U.S. movies accounted for 45-65 percent of total box-office receipts. By the end of the decade, combined earnings from ancillary markets far outweighed first-run box-office earnings; domestic theatrical accounted for only about 30-35 percent of a film's revenue, with the remaining portion split between home video (another 30-35 percent), foreign theatrical rentals (15-20 percent) and television sales (10-15 percent).[15] Nevertheless, as Thomas Schatz has noted, Hollywood has remained focused on the domestic box office because of its role in establishing the film commodity that generates revenues down the line. All the ancillary markets are largely driven by a film's performance in this venue, and it is still the U.S. theatrical release "which serves as the 'launch site' for its franchise development, establishing its value in all other media markets."[16] Even *Variety* has called first-run exhibition "the bell-tone that resonates across the entire spectrum of supplemental markets."[17]

Additionally, all six major film studios were now part of conglomerates. Gulf + Western (Paramount's parent company) also owned Madison Square Garden, Desilu, Simon and Schuster, and Paramount Pictures Television. Yet, only 11 percent of G+W's revenues were derived from entertainment industry holdings and just 4 percent from Paramount Pictures in 1981. That same year, United Artists was bringing only 12 percent of the revenues in for Transamerica, Universal represented 22 percent of MCA's income, and Warner Bros. accounted for 24 percent of Warner Communications revenue.[18] However, by 1989, the entertainment division of Gulf+Western, led by Paramount Pictures, accounted for over 50 percent of G+W's yearly income . . . all during a particularly weak year in which Paramount had only 14 releases and a 13.8 percent share of the market.[19] This was primarily due to the overwhelming success of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* ($197 million domestic box office), demonstrating just how important a single film commodity—and its initial release—had become to these conglomerates and their overall revenue structure by the end of the 1980s.

The Role of the *Paramount* Decrees

The specific language of the Supreme Court's decision in *U.S. v. Paramount Pictures Inc., et al.* would ultimately provide the key to its unraveling 40 years after the series of consent decrees divorced production from distribution, restructured the industry, and began a new era of filmmaking in Hollywood.[20] Although the government urged the court to find vertical integration illegal per se, it refused to do so. Instead, the ruling declared that the legality of vertical integration under the Sherman Act hinged upon:

- the purpose or intent with which it was conceived, and
- the power that it creates and the attendant purpose or intent

Consequently, to prevent future vertical integration in the film industry, the court would have to prove that the studios were intentionally conspiring to restrain trade, suppress competition, and gain control over the industry rather than simply expanding their businesses legitimately. The future burden of interpreting, enforcing, and effectively maintaining competition in the film industry was thus placed entirely on the shoulders of the court. Since court administrators considered *Paramount* to be one case, the court of Justice Edmund L. Palmieri alone heard over 500 acquisition hearings and denied petitions asking to acquire a total of over 600 theaters, all by 1980.[21]

Instead of uniformly barring all studio distributors from owning theaters, the decrees only explicitly prohibited Warner Bros., Fox, and Loew's/MGM from venturing into exhibition in the future *without prior court approval*. Due to the prompt "surrender" and negotiations with the court on the part of Paramount and RKO, these studios received more favorable terms than the other Big Five companies. Consequently, RKO and Paramount were actually free to acquire theaters without first consulting the court and, ironically, there is no stipulation in the actual *Paramount* decree that prohibits Paramount itself from owning theaters or participating in exhibition.

The consent decrees began to erode on the books in 1963, when National General Theaters, the original divested circuit of Twentieth Century-Fox, was granted reentry into the business of distribution and production. However, the beginning of the end is more appropriately dated to February 27, 1980, when one of the original *Paramount* defendants (and a much more

powerful Hollywood entity than National General) would successfully attempt to vertically integrate once again. Loew's Corporation (former parent of MGM) and Loew's Theaters finally won relief from their consent decrees and gained permission to reenter production/distribution during Ronald Reagan's second month in office.

While the court refused to go as far as *permanently* vacating and terminating the decrees as Loew's had requested, they did nevertheless allow Loew's theaters to reenter into production and distribution, provided that the company did not exhibit its own films. The court's reasoning was that current marketplace conditions provided for the preservation of a competitive industrial climate. Essentially, for the *Paramount* decrees, this marked the beginning of the shift from a regulatory statute to a protective blanket behind which the studios would hide when splurging on theaters in the late 1980s. The studios began to back off from their barrage of petitions, realizing that it was preferable to maintain the illusion of regulation and keep the decrees in place rather than continue to fight the courts—especially when government enforcement and/or regulation was no longer a threat.

That threat, it is safe to say, was removed shortly after Reagan took office. In 1980, the Justice Department undertook a massive project to review the consent decrees that were in place for most national industries. The anti-trust division of the Department of Justice also laid out the 1985 vertical restraint guidelines, which were extremely lenient and tolerated behavior that would have previously been under suspicion for restraint of trade. Furthermore, in keeping with the administration's laissez-faire approach to mergers and acquisitions and the overall expansive spirit of supply-side Reaganomics, the Justice Department announced in February 1985 that while it would not formally terminate the *Paramount* decrees, it would support such motions in cases where the action was "in the public interest."[22] The reason given was that Antitrust Chief J. Paul McGrath was unwilling to expend the resources necessary to terminate the decrees through judicial channels, not that McGrath still viewed the decrees as relevant and necessary. Effectively, the statement dissolved the authority of the decrees, if not legally then practically; by removing the looming threat of a government lawsuit and declaring themselves amenable to their eventual dissolution, the Department of Justice eliminated the most compelling reason to comply with the *Paramount* consent decrees.

As a result, the continued existence of the *Paramount* decrees after 1985 has given the appearance that the film industry was still being actively regulated when, in practice, this was not entirely the case. Actually, the essence of *Paramount* has been quietly transformed from an iron fist wielded by the federal government into a façade manipulated by the studios; this façade has effectively solidified their power and kept potential government scrutiny at bay.

Still, Warners and Loew's continued to press on in search of legally sanctioned relief from their decrees. Their persistence paid off in June 1986, when Warner Communications received a modification from the court allowing the acquisition of theaters (provided that they were held separately from distribution and dealt with at arm's length).[23] One year later, Tri-Star and Loew's actually gained full exemption from their decrees and finally won legal relief from *Paramount*.[24]

Still, the Department of Justice maintained that there had been "neither a moratorium nor a letdown of enforcement of the Paramount consent decrees," despite the recent massive reentry of distributors into exhibition and the court approval of such activity. A brief was filed on the part of independent exhibitors, claiming that Tri-Star/Loew's were asking "permission to bring back the good old days of unbridled vertical integration . . . which led to the *Paramount* decrees in the first place." They accused the DOJ of "shifting their stance on the [consent] decrees with each new administration."[25]

Essentially, these exhibitors were correct. This is exactly how the *Paramount* consent decrees—and consent decrees in nearly every industry—have been enforced: subject to politics and the prevailing interpretation of anti-trust law. The parameters and subtleties of the ruling in the *Paramount* case (and the legal foundations upon which it has been built) have also allowed for changes in political leadership and marketplace conditions to dictate the trajectory of the case. Consequently, Hollywood's return to vertical integration was a direct result of the manner in which the consent decrees were (re)interpreted by the Reagan administration during the 1980s.

Reaganomics and Hollywood

As the Hollywood conglomerates expanded, President Reagan was busy incorporating the anti-government sentiment that had increased throughout the 1970s into

his economic agenda. He was intent on eliminating the use of anti-trust enforcement as a means of regulating business. His economic policy was generalized and extremely tolerant of mergers and conglomerate growth. Reagan adopted the generalized rules of competition as articulated by the Chicago School, and during his terms of office *no* vertical mergers were challenged in any industry. Vertical integration was viewed as benign: it was perceived as a strategy promoting economic efficiency as opposed to anti-competitive behavior or restraint of trade.

Reagan's neo-classical economic approach to regulation and anti-trust (named for scholars at the University of Chicago where it was largely formulated) is one that calls for a single set of operational principles designed to apply to a wide variety of industrial markets and contexts.[26] Different industries are treated alike under this model, as opposed to the idiosyncratic, extremely particularized approach emblematic of the New Deal, which created an enormous and varied anti-trust apparatus. Thus, the expanded scope of acceptable business practices and the narrowing parameters of anti-trust laws under Reagan and William Baxter, his first Assistant Attorney General in charge of Anti-trust, created a political and business climate in the 1980s that enabled the industry to once again assume the form of a vertically integrated oligopoly. Indeed, Hollywood could not have scripted it better, as deregulation became the order of the day, a former star sat in the White House, and even FCC Chairman Mark Fowler invoked film rhetoric on the job, referring to himself as Luke Skywalker crusading against the "evil empire" of regulation.

Consequently, it is important to understand deregulation in the Reagan era not as the mere absence of regulation, but instead as the presence of a politicized and carefully crafted government stance of support for marketplace policies. Definitions of regulation and corporate culture were undergoing tremendous change during this time. Once Hollywood embraced new technologies and the potential of the global marketplace (and actually came to depend on this market to recoup spiraling production costs), the needs of a national industry and the global marketplace were suddenly brought into conflict. These conflicts would ultimately destroy the consent decree model and our overriding approach to anti-trust during the twentieth century. In the end, these politicized changes in attitude would also prove to be the core of synergy between politics and the film industry during the Reagan era.

The Process of Vertical Reintegration

The political shift ushered in by Reagan led to open season on exhibition outlets, and the certain, albeit unceremonious, death of the consent decrees. His second term was a period of unprecedented theater acquisitions, and 4,357 screens eventually changed hands for $1.62 billion.[27] Major studios acquired almost 20 percent of the country's theaters (which comprised over 50 percent of the "showcase screens," or those which consistently quadrupled the national average in box-office revenues). The studios emerged owning more than 3,500 of the 22,000 screens in the U.S.—or about the same percentage as the five vertically integrated majors had operated before the *Paramount* decrees in 1945.[28]

The first to venture into the exhibition business during the 1980s was Columbia Pictures, which began acquiring interest in the Walter Reade Theaters (11 prime screens in Manhattan) by December 1981. Coca-Cola (the company that bought Columbia in 1982) added to their shares in 1983 to bring the ownership stake up to 41.7 percent. In January 1986, Reade officially became a wholly owned subsidiary of Coke after Coca-Cola bought all remaining shares, spending a total of $24 million on the circuit.[29]

However, it was not technically reentry into exhibition for Columbia, since the studio had never owned theaters before. Instead, it was MCA (parent company of Universal) that truly began the industry stampede to purchase exhibition outlets in May of 1986. Their acquisition of 50 percent interest in Cineplex Odeon and its then-1,176 screens/395 sites in North America for $159 million[30] was the significant purchase that set the tone for the end of the 1980s. While Universal also had no prior restriction on acquiring theaters, Cineplex was the largest theater chain in North America in terms of revenue and seats.

Furthermore, Cineplex was initiating a massive takeover splurge of its own, going from 1,068 screens in January 1986 at the time of the MCA buy to 1,510 screens just eight months later.[31] Once CEO Garth Drabinsky acquired the Plitt circuits in 1985 for $65 million, Cineplex Odeon was significantly larger than any of its competitors, including General Cinema, United Artists, and AMC.[32] Cineplex and its Plitt Theaters Group subsidiary went about acquiring numerous lucrative chains during the year, including the Septum, Essaness, Neighborhood Theaters Inc. (76 screens), RKO Century (130 screens), and Sterling Recreation Organization theaters (99 screens), and the lease for

the prestigious Carnegie Hall Cinema in New York City. The magnitude of this acquisition sent a clear signal: the Justice Department was buying the hands-off approach of the Reagan administration wholesale.

As *Variety* put it, after MCA's Cineplex buy in 1986, "a cry was heard: 'Everybody, into the pool!'"[33] Consequently, the initial rush to dive in and purchase exhibition outlets resulted in the following deals by 1988[34]:

- Tri-Star (1/3 owned by Columbia) purchased Loew's theater chain (232 screens) for $300 million in December 1986, USA Cinemas (317 screens) in 1988 for $165 million, and Music Makers theaters.[35]
- Gulf + Western (Paramount) already controlled the Famous Players circuit in Canada (469 screens). Shortly after the MCA deal, G+W bought the Trans-Lux (24 screens) for $15 million in July 1986, the expanding Mann chain (360 screens) for $220 million in October 1986, and Festival Enterprises (101 screens) for $50 million in December 1986.
- Warner Bros. became partners with Gulf + Western in theater exhibition in 1987, when their parent Warner Communications, Inc. bought a 50 percent interest in Paramount's 472 Cinamerica (Mann + Festival + Trans-Lux) screens for $150 million.[36]
- Cannon bought the 425 screen Commonwealth theater chain (sixth largest in U.S.) for $25 million, adding to its 587 screens in Europe in July 1986.

Suddenly, everything old was new again, and Hollywood's theater holding patterns were looking strikingly similar to the way they did 40 years earlier. So were the studio giants: Paramount was the king of the box office, with 22 percent of the market share in 1986 and 20 percent in 1987.[37] The National Association of Theater Owners (NATO) announced that the record number of screens in the US had reached 22,721 by late 1987.[38] Further, it was estimated that a dozen companies controlled about 45 percent of all movie screens in North America.[39] Integrated circuits now accounted for 10 percent of the nation's screens, up from *zero* in 1980.[40] All the while, leading chains such as AMC and Cineplex were building or acquiring hundreds of screens, and the antitrust division at the Justice Department was reportedly "unconcerned" with the takeovers and events.[41]

The majors' aggressive move into exhibition was stunning for several reasons. First of all, the brazen manner in which Hollywood flouted the spirit (if not the legal letter) of the *Paramount* decrees seemed to depart from traditional business practices. The majors have had a long history of maintaining the appearance of self-regulation in order to keep government regulators at bay, and it seems that the sudden and flagrant disregard for such established industry protocol would only cry out for scrutiny and possible re-regulation. This action bore the stamp of companies who felt newly empowered and invulnerable, obviously stemming from their perception of the government's shift in attitude toward *Paramount*.

Secondly, the prices that distributors were paying for theater circuits were inordinately expensive. The studios were paying 12-14 times cash flow for the theaters, as opposed to the 5-6 times cash-flow price that exhibitors charged one another for screens.[42] Especially in light of the box-office decline and unstable industrial terrain that faced the majors in the 1980s, taking this risk was quite bold. Further, new competition from cable, pay-per-view, and especially home video was dramatically eroding the theatrical revenues. Audience numbers were stagnant and exhibition was expanding—but only at a fraction of the rate of production. While the total number of theater screens had gone from 17,590 to over 23,000 during the 1980s, this increase represented only 31.5 percent, hardly in keeping with the tremendous boom in production.

Consequently, the rental split began to shift in favor of the exhibitor, and theater owners began to pull films after the second weekend in order to make room for the newer releases.[43] This put more importance on a film's opening and allowed less time for word of mouth to build. In turn, a frantic increase in advertising expenditures began. The average cost to market a film in 1980 was $3.5 million. That had doubled by 1988. Overall, the decade saw a 120 percent increase in average advertising costs.[44] And having a safe haven for showing one's own product (particularly titles which might not be strong enough to merit good bookings at arm's length) was not the only benefit to getting back into the exhibition business. Theater ownership could also provide "a very important bargaining chip in obtaining playtime at theaters owned by a fellow distributor/exhibitor, especially on a regional basis."[45] With the blockbuster strategy of

ultra-wide release patterns, this access to exhibition space was now critical, and becoming more precious.

Granted, this activity was taking place within a context of intense mergers and acquisitions in the industry at large. By the early 1990s, the parent companies of the studios were gradually expanding in the direction of becoming full-blown entertainment conglomerates. Furthermore, they were beginning to offer alternative avenues of distribution and exhibition for product, so one could make an argument that some were vertically integrated even before the purchase of theaters. However, it would be impossible for this type of growth and consolidation to have taken place without the sanction of the courts and the cooperation of the Department of Justice, both of which are subject to the influence and shifting winds of the political climate.

Post-Hollywood? 1989 and Beyond

It is most interesting to note that 1989, the year Reagan left office, was a watershed year for media-related deals that began a third wave of conglomerate takeovers in the industry. Four hundred and fourteen corporate deals were struck in 1989, totaling over $42 billion, the most notable of which were the Time-Warner merger ($14 billion) and Sony's acquisition of Columbia and CBS records ($5.4 billion).[46] The stakes in the film business have also become increasingly global, and with the industrial blueprint implemented during the 1980s, a new period ("Post-Hollywood"?) has certainly begun. Six vertically integrated multinational conglomerates engulf what we used to call the Hollywood studios, and the economy has undergone corresponding sets of shifts—from regulatory to deregulatory, liberal to conservative, and national to global capitalism/markets. It is clear that Reagan's legacy created a media marketplace characterized by high concentration of ownership and very few regulatory constraints, quite similar to that of Hollywood's golden era.

Furthermore, in 1989, Warner Bros. finally won complete relief from its decree. The court of Federal District Judge William C. Connor said that changes in the marketing and distribution of films since the *Paramount* suit was originally filed completely eliminated any compelling reason for maintaining the decree. By 1992, it seemed that the consent decrees were no longer applicable to the motion picture industry, at least in the eyes of the courts and the Justice Department.[47] The courts and the DOJ certainly suggest that they would not oppose motions to terminate the *Paramount* decrees if the studios initiated proceedings, but they would not expend the resources to originate such action. Meanwhile, the studios and their parent companies seem content to be "regulated" by the toothless tiger that *Paramount* has become.

Consequently, it might appear that in the present industrial context, vertical integration of the film studio has become inconsequential. After all, with numerous other avenues of distribution and exhibition under the same corporate umbrella, why would something like theater ownership be so important? The structural economy already afforded the benefits of a vertically integrated constitution to Hollywood—even before the film studios per se were buying up theaters. Basically, the fact remains that first-run domestic exhibition still determines how a film performs in all other arenas: international exhibition, television, video, marketing tie-ins, etc. If a film flops at the box office, this undeniably hurts home video orders, television rights, and all other ancillary sales. Conversely, a profitable first run can send these revenues soaring.

Inevitably, there have been significant detrimental effects of vertical integration on independent producers and theaters. For instance, in 1987, there were accusations that independent producers stood less than a 50 percent chance of having their films distributed to neighborhood theaters, and 11 of Hollywood's largest distributors were taking in 96 percent of the domestic box-office revenues.[48] This produced what *Variety* called "a stranglehold on the market" when compared to the 20-25 percent market share that the independents held just 15 years earlier.[49] Therefore, the necessary conditions for establishing a successful first run at the box office (now largely defined in terms of a film's performance on its opening weekend) are subject to the limitations imposed by vertical integration—a cost of doing business that carries tremendous consequences.

The odd moments of cooperation and collusion that have historically occurred between the government and the Hollywood film industry took on renewed strength during the 1980s. A unique and symbiotic relationship would become the cornerstone of Reagan-era Hollywood—a synergy of industry and politics that would prove to be far more powerful than any other in Hollywood history, leaving its legacy standing in the vast footprints of today's media giants.

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Notes

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2. Thomas Schatz, "The Return of the Hollywood Studio System," in *Conglomerates and the Media*, Barnouw, Erik, et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 84.
3. Tino Balio. " 'A Major Presence in All the World's Important Markets,' " in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema,* ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (New York: Routledge, 1998), 61.
4. *Variety,* April 7, 1982, p. 3.
5. MPAA, *1996 U.S. Economic Review*.
6. Standard & Poor's Industry Surveys 1980-90.
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8. Nancy Griffin and Kim Masters, *Hit & Run* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 173.
9. Standard & Poor's Industry Surveys 1984, p. L21.
10. Standard & Poor's Industry Surveys 1985, p. L18.
11. *Variety,* February 26, 1986, p. 3.
12. *Variety,* November 27, 1985, p. 3.
13. Harold Vogel, *Entertainment Industry Economics,* 4th Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 83.
14. Edward Herman and Dan McChesney, *The Global Media* (Washington: Cassell, 1997), 39.
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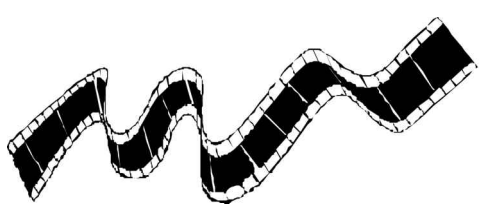
16. Schatz, "The Return of the Hollywood Studio System," 83.
17. *Variety,* August 4, 1982, p. 28.
18. Jon Lewis, "Trust and Anti-Trust in the New New Hollywood," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 35:1 (Winter 1996): 86.
19. Standard & Poor's Industry Surveys 1989, p. L 22.
20. Because the case was actually litigated, the judgments are not consent decrees in the traditional sense. Only the details of relief were negotiated and entered into by consent.
21. Justice Edmund L. Palmieri, Memorandum Opinion, *U.S. v. Paramount Pictures, Inc., et al.*, August 28, 1980, pp. 4-5.
22. Department of Justice Press Release, February 6, 1985, p. 2.
23. *U.S. v. Loew's Inc., et al.,* U.S. D.C., S.D.NY, Order, August 27, 1986.
24. Tri-Star became bound by Loew's decrees when Tri-Star purchased Loew's Theaters in 1986.
25. All quotes are from *Variety,* June 10, 1987, pp. 3, 23.
26. There are notable exceptions to this generalized approach, such as the market-specific regulatory guidelines for airlines, telecommunications (public utilities), and intellectual property.
27. *Variety,* January 14, 1987, p. 3.
28. Thomas Guback, "The Evolution of the Motion Picture Theater Business in the 1980s," *Journal of Communication* 37:2 (Spring 1987): 74.
29. In March, 1987 Coca-Cola turned around and re-sold Reade theaters to Cineplex Odeon for $32.5 million, capitalizing on the exhibition craze and making a tidy profit. *Variety,* March 25, 1987, p. 3.
30. *Variety,* May 14, 1986, p. 14.
31. *Variety,* January 7, 1987, p. 24.
32. General Cinema was the nation's largest exhibitor chain (as well as the largest independent bottler of Pepsi-Cola products) and an early pioneer of shopping-mall cinemas. AMC was busy initiating its own series of takeovers at this time, growing to 1,336 screens in 27 states.
33. *Variety,* January 14, 1987, p. 7.
34. All information is from *Variety* unless otherwise noted.
35. Tri-Star was initially formed as a co-venture between Columbia Pictures, HBO, and CBS, Inc. in 1984.
36. Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000), 88.
37. *Variety,* January 6, 1988, p. 1. Buena Vista (Disney) was second with 14 percent and Warner Bros. was third with 13 percent.
38. *Variety,* November 25, 1987, p. 6.
39. *Washington Post,* August 2, 1988, C1.
40. Palmieri Opinion, *U.S. v. Loew's Inc., et al.,* U.S. D.C., S.D.NY, 705 F.Supp. 878; 1988-2 Trade Cas. (CCH) pp. 68, 360.
41. In addition to the producer/distributor expansion, there were some independent exhibitors that decided to branch out into distribution, largely as a response to the majors' encroachment on the theater sector. For example, Cineplex formed Cineplex Odeon Films as an American distribution arm and National Amusements linked with Viacom.
42. *Variety,* October 29, 1986, p. 46.
43. *Variety,* January 7, 1987, p. 24.
44. MPAA, *1996 U.S. Economic Review*.
45. *Variety,* January 14, 1987, p. 7.
46. Schatz, "The Return of the Hollywood Studio System," 85.
47. Loew's and Tri-Star won complete relief from their decrees in 1992.
48. *Communications Daily,* April 8, 1987, p. 4.
49. *Variety,* February 25, 1987, p. 98.



Alisa Perren

sex, lies and marketing

Miramax and the Development of the Quality Indie Blockbuster

The origins of an *American Beauty* are in 1989 with Steven Soderbergh doing that kind of movie.

—Harvey Weinstein, 2000[1]

In 1989, the world of independent distribution was in disarray. While the appearance of the video market in the 1980s had helped spur the emergence and expansion of a number of independent distributors, by the end of the decade several of these same companies—including Vestron, Island, and Cinecom—had overextended themselves by investing heavily in larger budget, in-house productions. Consequently, by 1989, many within the industry were predicting the death of the independent distributor. However, what seemed to be the decline of independent distribution was actually an "independent shakedown," a label presciently attached to the period by *Los Angeles Times* writer Daniel Cerone in June 1989.[2] Cerone saw that it was a transitional time within the independent world. While the vast majority of independent distributors who had thrived in the 80s were forced to declare bankruptcy by the end of the decade, a few companies were positioned to make a significant mark on the industrial structure and aesthetics of low-budget filmmaking in the 90s. At the head of the pack was Miramax.

The August 1989 release of *sex, lies and videotape* by Miramax marked a turning point in American independent cinema. In fact, the film should be perceived as central to the development of New Hollywood aesthetics, economics, and structure.[3] *sex, lies and videotape* ushered in the era of the "indie blockbusters"—films that, on a smaller scale, replicate the exploitation marketing and box-office performance of the major studio high-concept event pictures.[4] On a cost-to-earning ratio, Steven Soderbergh's creation —with its $1.1 million dollar budget and $24 million plus in North American box office—was a better investment than *Batman,* which—at an investment of $50 million—returned $250 million in domestic box office.[5]

These figures begin to suggest how *sex, lies and videotape* helped to set the standard for low-budget, niche-based distribution in the 90s and to lay the groundwork for a bifurcation within the entertainment industry.[6] In the ten years following the release of *sex, lies and videotape,* each major studio or media conglomerate created or purchased at least one specialty division. These divisions generally operated relatively autonomously from the studio in terms of production and distribution. In the wake of Disney's April 1993 purchase of Miramax, a number of studio-based niche operations emerged, including Universal Focus, Para-

Film Quarterly, Vol. no. 55, Issue no. 2, pages 30-39. ISSN: 0015-1386. © 2001 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Send requests for permission to reprint to: Rights and Permissions, University of California Press, Journals Division, 2000 Center Street, Suite 303, Berkeley, CA 94704-1223.

mount Classics, and Fox Searchlight. The studios focused predominantly on the distribution of big-budget spectacles, while studio-based subsidiaries (which Miramax became in 1993, when Disney purchased the company) focused predominantly on smaller-scale quality pictures that centered on the foibles of well-developed characters.[7] While the majors favored projects such as *The Rock* (1996), *Con Air* (1997), and *Enemy of the State* (1998), studio subsidiaries developed such films as *Shine* (1996*), Good Will Hunting* (1997), and *The Cider House Rules* (1999). But it was *sex, lies and videotape,* in the skillful hands of Miramax, that redefined the label of "independence" as it was used by the press and the entertainment industry. During the years that followed its release, a number of films would replicate its financial success and media attention. And the vast majority of these would be theatrically distributed in the U.S. by Miramax.

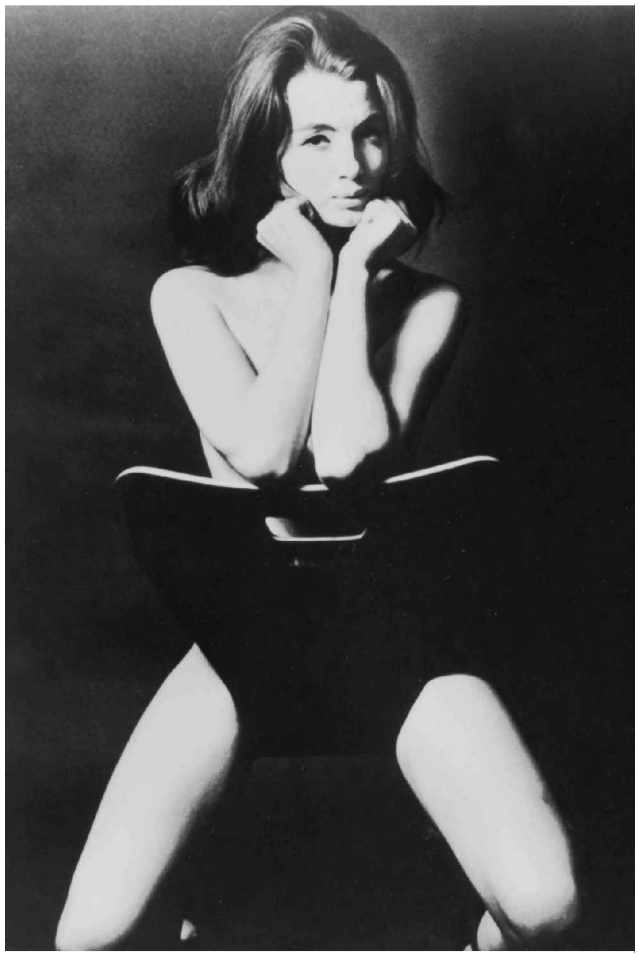
Miramax in the 1980s

Founded in downtown Buffalo, New York, in 1979 by brothers Harvey and Robert (Bob) Weinstein, Miramax began, like many low-budget distributors of the late 70s and early 80s, by booking live rock-and-roll acts as well as exhibiting classic films and concert movies. But the Weinsteins soon branched out, first with film festivals that screened cult favorites and foreign-language films, and then by moving into production and distribution. They made the kinds of movies that the studios weren't interested in but that had developed into profitable ventures by virtue of the emergence of the home video market. As they slowly expanded during the course of the 80s, the Weinsteins and their staff grew increasingly adept at selling positive images of themselves and their company along with their films. They became known for employing exploitation marketing tactics to promote their movies, with publicity stunts ranging from encouraging *Erendira* (1983) actress Claudia Ohana to pose for *Playboy* to setting up actor Daniel Day-Lewis, who portrayed cerebral palsy sufferer Christy Brown in *My Left Foot* (1989), to testify before Congress on behalf of the Americans With Disabilities Act.

Because the company's executives were so skilled at selling positive images of themselves and their films (including *sex, lies and videotape*), reconstructing a history of Miramax becomes a complicated task. It is often hard to distinguish legitimate claims from exaggeration. Yet in spite of Miramax's effective integration of myth and fact, a number of details about the contours of the company's development can be untangled from the mix.

During the 80s, Miramax consistently released three to four films per year. Except for a few failed efforts in production, including the 1986 co-directorial effort *Playing for Keeps* (released through Universal), the company focused mainly on acquiring and distributing films produced by outside companies. Miramax was interested in a range of documentary, foreign-language, and art house-oriented films, basing their choices on three criteria. First, they selected movies that could be promoted as quality pictures—films that aspired to the status of "art" in terms of style and narrative construction. These movies were often promoted at least in part on the merits of their director's unique vision. Such films—examples are Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (1987), Bille August's *Pelle the Conquerer* (1987), and Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988)—had the potential for garnering critical support from the outset, a crucial component for distributors working with limited advertising budgets. Second, Miramax selected nonclassical films that focused on unconventional subjects and styles: *Working Girls* was a hard-edged critique of prostitution, while *The Thin Blue Line* was a documentary about a man on death row whom Morris proved to be wrongly accused. Both films' documentary aesthetic also set them apart from most slick, glossy Hollywood product. Third, Miramax found marketing hooks that could help the films transition from the art house to the multiplex. With *Working Girls,* for example, the Weinsteins "determined how to sell the sex in a film that was utterly, demonstrably unsexy," while with *The Thin Blue Line* Harvey Weinstein pledged, "Never has Miramax had a movie where a man's life hangs in the balance."[8]

Thus, by appealing to multiple niches and using sex, violence, and controversy as sales strategies, the



Scandal: Christine Keeler in 1963

Scandal: Joanne Whalley-Kilmer as Christine Keeler

Weinsteins gained a foothold in an increasingly competitive marketplace and attracted the attention of producers and financiers looking for a distributor. As much as Miramax's success can be interpreted as an accident or side effect of a more broadly shifting industrial structure, such an interpretation must be balanced by attention to the business savvy and acute judgment of Miramax executives, led by the Weinstein brothers. Other strategies developed by the Weinsteins throughout the late 80s further aided the company's growth even as most other independent distributors failed. The Weinsteins limited their spending, opted for continuing in acquisitions rather than producing their own films, and restricted their release schedule. The factor that finally motivated the brothers to go into production was an infusion of money in 1988 from Midland Montague Ventures, an arm of the London-based Midland Bank. With a $25 million debt/equity package, the brothers moved from acquiring and distributing films to producing them. Their first in-house production through this arrangement was the aptly titled *Scandal* (1989), a film about British defense minister John Profumo's affair with teenager Christine Keeler. The controversy, with its rumors of the betrayal of state secrets, may have contributed to the fall of the Conservative government in 1963, but it helped Miramax produce a hit. Costing $7 million in a co-venture with Britain's Palace Pictures, the film grossed $30 million worldwide, in part due to a poster that featured a nude Joanne Whalley-Kilmer as Keeler provocatively straddling a chair, and in part due to a promotional/talk-show tour by Keeler herself.

With the success of *Scandal* and the help of good reviews, shrewd marketing, strong festival screenings, and extensive promotions, Miramax began a string of hits that peaked with *Cinema Paradiso, My Left Foot,* and, of course, *sex, lies and videotape,* which played a particularly important role in redefining low-budget

filmmaking and marketing. The company rapidly rose from being a mid-level independent distributor to become one of the few surviving independent distributors of the 80s. Even as companies such as Orion, MCEG, and Vestron disappeared from the film scene, Miramax thrived, turning the very label of independent into a sign of distinction. In this process of differentiation, independent films earned more money—and gained more interest from the studios.

sex, lies and videotape: The Beginning of the Indie Boom

It is notable that Miramax played no role in the initial development of *sex, lies and videotape*. In fact, the company did not have any involvement with the movie until it premiered at the U.S. Film Festival (later renamed the Sundance Film Festival) in 1989. The film was co-financed by RCA/Columbia Home Video and Virgin; RCA/Columbia obtained domestic video rights while Virgin retained foreign video. The producers were free to seek a theatrical distributor if RCA/Columbia rejected it upon "first look." This expectation of earning the investment back by video sales and rentals was a holdover from the early 80s, before the consolidation of the video rental industry.

Although the financiers expected to make back their money through rentals, this did not imply that they approved of the presence of the word "videotape" in the film's title. Even before they saw it, according to Soderbergh, the marketing people at RCA/Columbia had asked for a change, believing that "the vendors would *say* that the buying public would *think* that the film was shot on videotape."[9] The film's marketers—even before Miramax—obviously believed that an independent movie carried connotations bearing specific "qualities," but although these qualities may have included the more controversial (and hence salable) elements of sex and lies, they did not include the suggested "low-quality" appearance of videotape. The use of the word in the title was, however, probably more of a boon than a bane. As producer John Pierson explains, the word resonated symbolically: "By using videotape in the title . . . and in the film itself, Soderbergh almost literally ushered in the new era of the video-educated filmmaker."[10] Thus a film in which women confess their sexual histories and anxieties on videotape to help a central male character satisfy himself sexually was marked as timely and distinct for both technological and social reasons. The themes of impotence and sexual paranoia rang true in the late 80s, when AIDS panics were leading the news.

The film gained in popularity throughout the festival (which at this time had 30,000 visitors and was a much more low-profile event than would be the case in later years), screening in front of sold-out audiences and receiving rave reviews. Soderbergh more modestly observed that the "praise is getting out of hand,"[11] but *sex, lies and videotape* left the festival with the Dramatic Competition Audience Award and theatrical distribution offers from several independent distributors as well as one major studio. Yet in spite of extensive praise lavished on the film by the press and festival-goers alike, North American theatrical rights for *sex, lies and videotape* were not sold until a few weeks later, when Miramax purchased them at the American Film Market in Los Angeles. According to Soderbergh, Harvey Weinstein said that he would not go back to New York until he had the movie.[12] By 1989, Miramax had already established a reputation for outbidding the rest of the independent distributors. Yet when Miramax later reflected on how they "won" the rights to *sex, lies and videotape,* "the Weinsteins maintain[ed] that their marketing plan was as crucial as their cash advance."[13]

It is because marketing is as significant as content in the building of the quality independent blockbuster that Miramax's role can be seen as crucial in determining the film's box-office success. Ultimately, the interest created in the film as a result of Miramax's skillful distribution cannot be distinguished from the interest created in it by virtue of its subject matter and storyline. The company played up *sex, lies and videotape* to the press in ways that helped the film move out of the so-called art-house ghetto. In the process of marketing *sex, lies and videotape* as a quality independent as opposed to an art-house entity, Miramax also played itself up to the press in ways that helped to construct the company as the primary force in the film's development and financial success.

The marketing of the film began months before its August opening. According to Bob Weinstein, Miramax started to develop the pre-release buzz for *sex, lies and videotape* at the Cannes Film Festival in May 1989.[14] The film was initially screened for the main competition, but it was rejected and subsequently placed in the Director's Fortnight, the venue for new films from up-and-coming directors. However, a last-minute cancellation from another American film placed *sex, lies and videotape* back in the main competition. Soderbergh worried about the movie being lost in the shuffle, particularly as it was competing against Spike

Lee's high-profile *Do the Right Thing*. Yet his film ended up playing to standing ovations and shutting out Lee's film for awards. By the conclusion of the Cannes festival, *sex, lies and videotape* had won the prestigious Palme d'Or, given Soderbergh and his film enormous free publicity, and added to the cachet of festivals as valuable sites for building word of mouth.

Cannes marked just the beginning of the summer marketing blitz initiated by Miramax. The original 1989 press kit for *sex, lies and videotape* hints at the image the company tried to craft to the press and public: "The Weinstein brothers built their company with an aggressive marketing and distribution strategy, individually tailoring each film's release to suit its particular strengths." The very notion of "tailoring" a film on the basis of its strengths reveals the company's dependence on niche marketing. "Marketing is not a dirty word," Harvey Weinstein told the *Los Angeles Times* in May 1989. He continued, in what may be seen as a shorthand manifesto for Miramax as well as a more emphatic articulation of previous conceptions of quality independents:

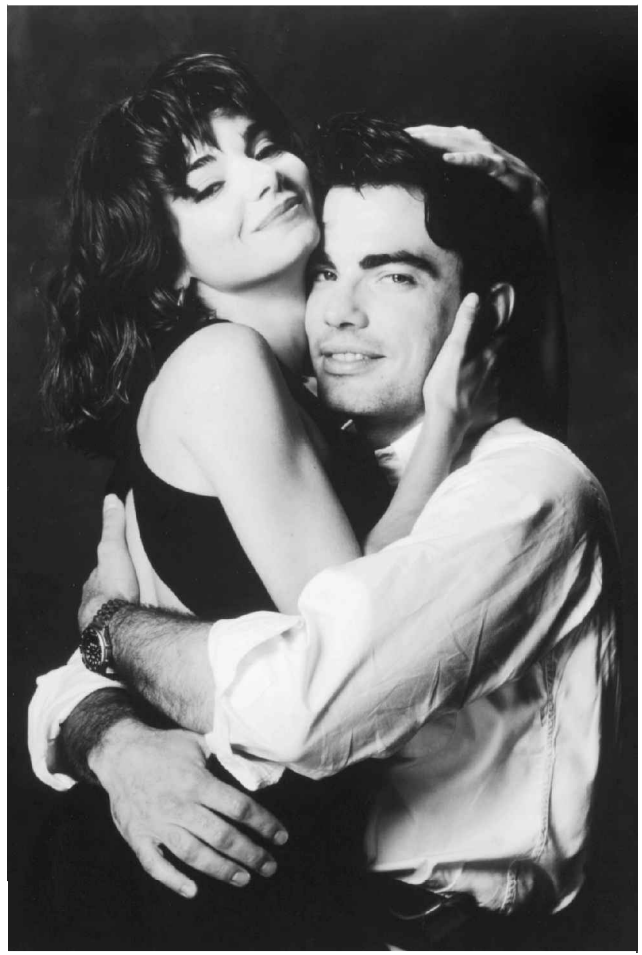
> Although we market artistic films, we don't use the starving-artist mentality in our releases. Other distributors slap out a movie, put an ad in the newspaper—usually not a very good one—and hope that the audience will find it by a miracle. And most often they don't. It's the distributors' responsibility to find the audience.[15]

For *sex, lies and videotape,* this amounted to an attempt to give the film the specialized attention that Soderbergh so desired, packaged as if it was a major studio release. Just one of the means by which Miramax accomplished this was by tapping into the high concept in even the lowest-budgeted film.[16] Thus when Soderbergh developed his own trailer, Miramax quickly rejected it, telling him it was "arthouse death." Although Soderbergh saw his trailer containing "a mood perfectly emulat[ing] the mood of the film . . . [and] not like any other trailer [he'd] ever seen," Miramax demurred. Soderbergh finally reached a compromise with Miramax in which the company used its own trailer, but also filled in some additional footage shot by Soderbergh as a transitional device.

All this suggests that although Miramax may have sold each film on its merits, the company nonetheless had certain ideas about what worked in promoting niche films. Clearly avant-garde trailers were not part of the company's conception of good marketing. An analysis of one of the print advertisements for *sex, lies and videotape* reveals several characteristics of Miramax marketing. In the one-sheet for the film's domestic theatrical distribution, Miramax tried to appeal to several markets simultaneously. First they pursued the art-house audience—a group consisting of cine-literate baby boomers who had grown up on a blend of international art cinema and New American Cinema. This niche, which was presumed to be knowledgeable of the status of festivals as sites for the celebration of global cinema, was sought through the text of the advertisement. At the top of the one-sheet, the most significant festival honors bestowed on the film were listed. Below the list of awards, a number of positive press responses were listed, including opinions from some of the best-known reviewers from the *New York Times,* the *Chicago Sun-Times,* and *Time* magazine.

The second niche targeted by Miramax was the youth audience—college students and twentysomethings. The largest print in the ad, aside from the film's title, came from two critics' statements that constructed two different visions of the film. The first comment, "One of the Best of 1989," associated the movie with the kinds of films that usually receive kudos, such as dramas. Meanwhile, the second comment, "An Edgy, Intense Comedy," suggested a lighter movie well suited for the August release date. The movie was thus differentiated as being more serious than its summer blockbuster counterparts even as it was drawn closer to studio product by its association with comedy. Meanwhile, the images depicted in the advertisement—of multiple couples embracing and kissing—contributed to the film's edgy mystique. Along with the film's title, these images conveyed raciness, excitement, something more adult—and not coincidentally, something more commercial. These images also conformed to the "exploitation" marketing tactics so characteristic of the company at this point in its development. As one reporter observed of Miramax's effective print ads, the company eagerly hinted at sexual desires that were not necessarily apparent in the films themselves.[17]

To many within the industry, Miramax's attempts to find the high concept in low-budget films—while still targeting specific niches in the market—was a welcome approach to a then-struggling independent film scene. As one public relations spokesman stated, in a manner that summed up the sentiments of many, "The marketers of quality independent films aren't doing as effective a job as they might be doing."[18] Hence the logic of Bob Weinstein declaring that "Some guys run from controversy, we run toward it."[19] By establishing this renegade image, Miramax differentiated itself within the marketplace.



Exploitation marketing for *sex, lies and videotape:* James Spader with Andie MacDowell (left) and Peter Gallagher with Laura San Giacomo—posed to pump up the film's sexuality.

The Weinsteins may have penetrated multiplexes in 1989, but they nonetheless remained aware of their position relative to the studios. Specifically, they recognized that their films had to complement rather than compete with the studios' product. They had no illusions that they could match the studios in terms of either financial investment or marketing scale. Thus they relied heavily on free publicity, word of mouth, and counter-programming strategies.[20] While they eventually released *sex, lies and videotape* on about 350 screens, they opened it slowly and let it build on positive reviews and reactions over more than six months. They scheduled a platform release for the film, opening it first only in Los Angeles and New York, and then later moving it into nationwide release by the end of the month. Thus *sex, lies and videotape* had its broadest opening in the time period when the studio blockbusters were fading and quality product was in short supply.

Press and Industry Discourse on *sex, lies and videotape*

To Steven Soderbergh, the overall impact of his film was jarring. In 1990, he returned to Sundance to find a far different scene, one to which he responded negatively. "I'm a little concerned by what *sex, lies* might have wrought here," Soderbergh told the Associated Press, adding, "this can become more of a film market than a film festival." Soderbergh's opinion seemed to be in the minority, however. Many more of those working for independents, as well as those writing about them, looked favorably at the mutually beneficial relationship developing between independents and festivals. Few could have anticipated that this relationship would evolve to the point where the pervasive attitude at Sundance 2000 would be described as "Buy low, *but buy, dammit*. Fail to snap up a certain movie and you might miss out on the next $140 million dollar cash

cow. Turn up your nose at a trend and the future might pass you by."[21]

What is apparent in retrospect is that the "small is beautiful" mentality that was beginning to become omnipresent at festivals as well as for promotional purposes was, in fact, the beginning of a larger industrial shift. Rather than *Batman* and *sex, lies and videotape* representing anomalies at both the mass-market and niche levels respectively, they were signals of broader structural and aesthetic changes afoot in New Hollywood. Even as the studios were reviving the same high-concept formulas with such 1990 releases as *Rocky V, Predator 2, Back to the Future III,* and *Days of Thunder,* the independents seemed comparatively fresh and cutting-edge with such films as *Longtime Companion, Pump Up the Volume, Henry V,* and *The Grifters*. The dichotomy between these two types of films indicates the widening split in the kinds of films being produced. The movies that were starting to return the most profits with the smallest risks were either the high-budget, high-concept franchises that had broad international appeal, or low-budget independents that could be targeted to a number of audiences and promoted relatively inexpensively through festivals, word of mouth, and positive critical response.

Thus, although independent releases were down 15 percent in 1989 from the previous year, and box-office receipts were down 7 percent, the slump was short-lived. The continuing global expansion of the industry, rather than contributing to what many predicted would be the demise of independent and/or low-budget filmmaking, actually contributed to their growth. The conditions of social diversity, along with a post-Fordist market structure, similarly led to the development of niche markets as byproducts of the film industry's ever-expanding global orientation. At the same time that many industry analysts predicted the inevitable demise of all but the high-concept blockbuster, then-Cinecom president Amir Malin explained more precisely why niche films would remain attractive culturally and economically:

> Just because someone sees *Indiana Jones* doesn't mean they won't want to see a sophisticated film like *sex, lies and videotape* or *Scenes from the Class Struggle* [*of Beverly Hills*]. The fallout will occur with the standard studio fare that cannot compete with the *Raiders, Ghostbusters* and *Batmans*.[22]

Malin's comments were prescient for two reasons. First, on the level of industrial structure, he suggests why standard studio fare (or the so-called middle-class films) would be the least cost-effective. Such movies, which at the time of *sex, lies and videotape* included thrillers such as *Pacific Heights* (1990) and romances such as *Joe Versus the Volcano* (1990), based their appeal primarily on their stories or their stars. The studios' event films, conversely, based their appeal on action, special effects, superstars, and simple marketing hooks.[23] Event pictures drove up the marketing, production, and distribution costs of all studio films. However, from the mid-70s onward, the studios increasingly viewed them as worthwhile because of their broader international appeal and synergistic potential.

To a growing number of industry executives, middle-level films did not offer the same global opportunities as event films. If event films failed at home, they could still make money abroad; a Stallone film—typically an event due to his superstar presence—could easily be translated across the globe, guaranteeing international box-office success even if its fate was uncertain in the U.S. If middle-level films failed at home, they were not likely to perform any better abroad, since they had neither the effects and action nor the simple marketing hooks that were the high-concept foundations of the globally oriented Hollywood product. With Disney estimating that by 1996, 60 percent of studio revenues were coming from abroad, and with many executives predicting that the international box office could increase to 80 percent of total entertainment revenues by the first decade of the millennium, event films continued to become more desirable. Meanwhile, middle-level star-genre vehicles—the types of films that were the staple of the Hollywood studio era—continued to lose value.

The second reason for the foresight in Malin's comments comes from his exploitation of the rhetoric of quality. In using the label "sophisticated" to describe *sex, lies and videotape,* Malin employed language in a manner similar to the Weinsteins. In other words, he depicted these movies as special films rather than as industry products. More important than the actual industrial circumstances within which a movie such as *sex, lies and videotape* was produced is the manner in which it was constructed by its marketing team and the press. Companies such as Miramax could take terms such as "independent," "quality," "specialty," and "sophisticated" and use them as points of distinction, helped by the fact that in the late 80s the studios were frequently portrayed in the media as ever-expanding monoliths cranking out cookie-cutter sequels with excessive action and minimal plots.

Miramax's rapid growth stemmed largely from making itself and its films favorites of the press with its emphasis on how films such as *sex, lies and videotape* were different from Hollywood product. Yet at the same time, the company broadened the audience of these same movies by portraying them as what Hollywood had to offer *and more*: full of sex, violence, and risky content.[24] This marketing sleight of hand, in which the films were at once similar and different from Hollywood, helped Miramax and other low-budget distributors carve out an often financially lucrative and aesthetically viable space for independent cinema from the late 80s and into the 90s.

The $24 million earned by *sex, lies and videotape* in its U.S. theatrical release was, however, a small sum compared to the $80 million-plus earned by the quality indie blockbuster hits released later in the decade—movies that included *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Good Will Hunting,* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999). Artisan's *The Blair Witch Project,* released almost exactly ten years after *sex, lies and videotape,* represented the culmination of the 1990s independent blockbuster trend. In its cost-to-profit ratio, its application of exploitation marketing tactics, its cinéma-vérité aesthetic, and its use of the discourse of independence to differentiate itself, *The Blair Witch Project* could be considered the cinematic descendant of Soderbergh's 1989 film.

If a strict structural definition of quality indie blockbusters were to apply, then very few independent films would qualify for it. Clearly, from an industrial standpoint, *Pulp Fiction, Good Will Hunting,* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* are not independent; aesthetically, their independence is also questionable. In the New Hollywood as it evolved in the age of Miramax, indie films increasingly employed established stars and featured classical filmmaking and scripts from established talent. In other words, 1990s indies—if such Miramax movies as *Citizen Ruth* (1996), *Copland* (1997), and *Rounders* (1998) are included—could be considered a hybrid of the studio system's A picture and the post-studio-era exploitation film. This suggests the extent to which "independence" (or its hip offspring, "indie") served as a discursive tool employed by the press and the industry. In addition, such indie examples provide further proof that, by the late 90s, the industry's focus was divided between two types of films: niche-targeted and high-concept. Within this context, the niche arena functioned as the key site in which new styles and modes of storytelling were blended to varying degrees; all the while, established talent merged with newer, up-and-coming actors, writers, and directors.

Thus a term that was introduced by the press during the late 80s as a descriptive label to explain structural and aesthetic changes afoot in the New Hollywood morphed in the next decade into a publicity tool for Miramax and its many imitators. The surprising fact was that even though by the mid-90s the label no longer held any definitional value, the press continued to celebrate the companies and the films as if they were guerrillas and renegades fighting Evil Hollywood. The most blatant example of this came from the consistent declaration by the mainstream press that "Independents Day" was afoot during the 1995 Oscar nominations. In this oft-titled "Year of the Independents," four low-budget indies—*The English Patient* (Miramax/Disney), *Breaking the Waves* (October/Universal), *Fargo* (Gramercy/Polygram), and *Shine* (Fine Line/Time Warner)—allegedly trounced the studios, which could only muster up one nominee, *Jerry Maguire* (Columbia). The irony was that all of these independents were released by subsidiaries owned by major media corporations. Yet attention to this shift came much more slowly. During most of the 90s, the mainstream press continued to depict the relationship between independents and majors in terms of conflict and opposition. It was not until Miramax tried to promote *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) as an independent that the tide truly started to turn. It was at this point that a significant portion of the press began to question the use of the label of independence by specialty divisions—and by themselves.

sex, lies and videotape: The Template for the Distribution of the 90s Niche Film

The critical and financial success of *sex, lies and videotape* not only served as an initial step in Miramax's ascendance to the status of top specialty distributor of the 90s, it was also an indication of a changing industry. The bifurcation of the industry came with some repercussions. First, the two Hollywoods each developed interrelated but fundamentally distinct aesthetics. While superstars and super explosions defined the high-concept films, quality independents became defined by well-known actors working for scale because of their belief in the script's explosive subject matter. If high-concept films became known primarily for their glossy look and high production values, quality independents were distinguished by virtue of their gritty look or edgy content. Following in the tradition established by *sex, lies and videotape,* independents of the

90s often stood out either because of an excessiveness in style, sex, and violence, or because of a minimalist aesthetic that emphasizes dialogue over camerawork.

Second, as these films developed in the hands of studio-based specialty divisions, they needed to have a clearly defined niche—whether it was teens, African-Americans, Latinos, women, or the art-house audience. In the process, there was a decline not only in the types of low-budget films that attained distribution, but also in the production of the so-called middle-range product—the standard star-genre formulations that were the bread and butter of the studio system. By the late 90s, such films were typically only placed into production based on the influence wielded by such powerful stars as Jim Carrey, Tom Hanks, and Julia Roberts.

At the beginning of the new millennium, Miramax—as well as the independent scene that it fostered—has changed dramatically. After years of financial support from Disney, the company has grown from an independent to an industry powerhouse in its own right. Miramax regularly releases more than 25 films a year. Films like *Scary Movie, Scream,* and *Chocolat* help the company bring in over $500,000,000 at the box office annually. Occasionally Miramax acquires smaller, independently produced pictures like *Human Traffic* and *Committed*; however, such films are no longer a priority for the company's executives, nor are they the focus of its marketing muscle. Miramax now focuses on developing its own stable of talent—writers, producers, and filmmakers with whom the company had nurtured relationships during the 1990s. Many of these people, including Quentin Tarantino, Kevin Williamson, Robert Rodriguez, Wes Craven, Anthony Minghella, and John Madden, have seen their careers blossom in large part due to Miramax's support.

The company, as well as much of the talent it has supported, has long since moved beyond the boundaries of the independent film world. The styles, subjects, and talent that defined the quality indie scene of the early 90s have now been incorporated into the Hollywood system. Films that earlier might have been labeled quality indies are now regularly produced by studio subsidiaries such as Fox Searchlight, Fine Line Pictures, and of course, Miramax. The content and distribution of *Boys Don't Cry, Dancer in the Dark,* and Soderbergh's own *Traffic* replicate that of *sex, lies and videotape*. And, as Harvey Weinstein observes, *American Beauty* is a direct cinematic descendant of *sex, lies and videotape*. These films continue the tradition established by Miramax in the late 80s and early 90s: aesthetically and topically challenging films can be commercially successful with skillful marketing.

The future, however, does not seem quite so bright for many newer filmmakers and independent distributors struggling to find a space in today's marketplace. With the industry now dominated by a combination of studios releasing big-budget films and specialty distributors handling niche films, independent distributors such as Cowboy Booking International, Winstar, and New Yorker Films are fighting to acquire films and secure available screens. Meanwhile, several of the most influential independent distributors, including Trimark and The Shooting Gallery, have succumbed to today's market pressures and ceased to exist. All of this translates into a much more competitive and uncertain terrain for filmmakers working outside of the studio environment. While Miramax led the way in transforming Hollywood aesthetics, economics, and structure during the 90s, the company has now become a crucial part of the system. It remains to be seen what the next *sex, lies and videotape* will be—and what as yet unidentified company will help drive its success.

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Notes

1. Jeff Gordinier, "Defy and Conquer," *Entertainment Weekly Special Edition: Our 10th Anniversary,* Spring 2000, p. 31.
2. Daniel Cerone, "Independent Film Makers, Marketers, Confront Box-Office Crisis," *Los Angeles Times,* 15 September, 1989, sec. 6, p. 4.
3. I employ the New Hollywood label as it is used by Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies,* ed. Jim Collins, Hillary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 25-32. For an extensive discussion of the intersection of aesthetics and marketing of big-budget Hollywood films, see Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994).
4. The term "indie" has been widely used by trade journalists to include films from studio specialty and niche subsidiaries such as Miramax, Fine Line, and Paramount Classics.
5. Paul D. Colford, "Movies Are Their Game; Miramax Steers Small Films into the Public Consciousness," *Newsday,* 20 February, 1990, part II, p. 8.
6. Scholars and journalists have acknowledged that there has been a split within the industry in recent years between low-budget niche films and high-concept event films, but in general, scholarly work on the emergence of indepen-

dents and specialty houses has been limited. The majority of attention has been on the evolution of the high-concept blockbuster and big-budget product of the major studios. For examples, see Tino Balio, "'A Major Presence in All the World's Important Markets,': The Globalization of Hollywood in the 1990s," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema,* ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 8-36, and Schatz, "The Return of the Hollywood Studio System," in *Conglomerates and the Media,* ed. Erik Barnouw (New York: The New York Press, 1997), pp. 73-106. While Balio, Schatz, and others have addressed the growth of specialty houses to an extent, Justin Wyatt has done the majority of work on low-budget product. For examples, see his discussions of Miramax and New Line in "Economic Constraints/Economic Opportunities: Robert Altman as Auteur," *The Velvet Light Trap* 38 (Fall 1996): pp. 51-67; "The Formation of the 'Major Independent'" Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema,* pp. 74-90; and "From Roadshowing to Saturation Release: Majors, Independents and Marketing/Distribution Innovations," in *The New American Cinema,* ed. Jon Lewis (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 64-86.

7. I use the word "quality" throughout in much the same way it is used by Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi in *MTM 'Quality Television'* (London: BFI, 1984). In "The MTM Style," Feuer, for example, writes that "The very concept of 'quality' is itself ideological. In interpreting an MTM programme as a quality programme, the quality audience is permitted to enjoy a form of television which is seen as more literate, more stylistically complex and more psychologically 'deep' than ordinary fare. The quality audience gets to separate itself from the mass audience and can watch TV without guilt, and without realising that the double-edged discourse that they are getting is also ordinary TV" (56). Quality independent films functioned in a similar sense for theatrical features released in the hands of Miramax.
8. John Pierson, *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of Independent American Cinema* (New York: Hyperion/Miramax Books, 1995), pp. 84, 87.
9. Steven Soderbergh, *sex, lies and videotape* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 21. In the decade between the release of *sex, lies and videotape* and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), this attitude shifted to a certain extent. By the end of the 1990s, it often became a means of product differentiation that a movie was shot on digital video.
10. Pierson, p. 131.
11. Aljean Harmetz, "Independent Films Get Bigger but Go Begging," *New York Times,* 1 February, 1989, p. C17.
12. Soderbergh, p. 225.
13. Colford, p. 8.
14. Ibid.
15. Cerone, "Taking an Independent Path," *Los Angeles Times,* 3 May, 1989, part 6, p. 1.
16. I apply the label "high concept" in much the same manner as it is applied by Wyatt in *High Concept.* He writes: "High concept can be conceived . . . as a product differentiated through the emphasis on style in production and through the integration of the film with their marketing" (23).
17. Colford, p. 8.
18. Cerone, "Independent Film Makers, Marketers Confront Box-Office Crisis," p. 4.
19. Cerone, "Taking an Independent Path, p. 1.
20. These tactics would change significantly by the late 90s as Miramax became the prominent studio subsidiary with a solid stable of prominent talent such as Quentin Tarantino, Wes Craven, and Kevin Williamson. At this point, both their product as well as their financial output altered somewhat, as vast sums of money were directed at marketing more commercially viable genre films such as *Scream* (1996), *Jackie Brown* (1997), and *The Faculty* (1998). Yet in terms of quality independents, Miramax's strategies remained remarkably stable during the 90s, altering only to the extent that the company had more capital to invest in production and marketing.
21. Jeff Gordinier and Chris Nashawaty, "Film's Next Frontier," *Entertainment Weekly,* 11 February, 2000, p. 20.
22. Cerone, "Smaller Films Seek a Summer Place," p. 1.
23. See Wyatt, *High Concept,* chapter 1.
24. The tension between presenting something "different" from the majors—and yet also more of the same—was a crucial element in Miramax's rise and its attractiveness to Disney. Yet paradoxically, it has also been the source of much consternation between Disney and Miramax as well as between Miramax and the press. The subsidiary and its parent have been repeatedly forced to test the threshold of what the public could handle in terms of risky and controversial subject matter on numerous occasions, including most dramatically *Kids* (1994), *Dogma* (1999), and *O* (2001). With both *Kids* and *Dogma,* the public outcry over Disney's relationship to these films compelled Miramax to sell the rights to both projects. With *O,* which portrayed racial conflict and violence in an American high school, Miramax kept the project shelved in the wake of the Columbine incident. There was scarcely any media outcry about Miramax handling this film; rather, the company pre-empted any such public conversation by continually pushing the film's release back until finally independent distributor Lion's Gate took over the film's theatrical distribution. This is just one further example of the way that a corporate parent has played a role in shifting the content and marketing strategies of Miramax in recent years. The same story could easily be told with other studio subsidiaries as well.

Reviews

All About My Mother

Director/writer: Pedro Almodóvar. Producer: Augustín Almodóvar. Cinematographer: Affonso Beato. Music: Alberto Iglesias. Sony Pictures Classics.

Pedro Almodóvar's *All About My Mother* includes two images in which a character makes physical contact with the camera so that its implicitly unlocalized, omnipresent perspective briefly becomes explicit, tangible, and material. The first time this occurs, Esteban is watching *All About Eve* with Manuela, his mother. After observing how the title has been mistranslated into Spanish, the young man records the correct title. As he does so, his pen writes on the face of the camera as if it were a page in his notebook. The second occurrence comes when Esteban is dead. As a kind of last rite for her son, Manuela has found Esteban's father, a transsexual named Lola, and told him of the son he never knew. As Lola kisses Esteban's photo, we see the father's lips approach from the perspective of the photo itself. They loom and fill the screen, emptying it of all else. The blank page and the unknown son's image align in the memory of the camera, which figures as a kind of disembodied, watching awareness that materializes once it is touched.

All About My Mother actually begins with an unnamed man's organs becoming available for transplant, but we see the process completed only with the death of Esteban, son of the transplant coordinator, Manuela. The images of Esteban's heart being transplanted have a cool clarity, their colors predominantly gray and blue. They show death as an ongoing and tangible presence, cold and weighty in its materiality, a corpse, and its feeling, grief. At the same time, the continuous, detailed depiction of the transplant suggests life being transmitted or transferred. The medical workers are concentrated and hurried: there is something at stake, something still alive and urgent.

Manuela acts as if she also feels something remains of Esteban, a presence that surrounds her

Cecilia Roth (above and right) as Manuela and Eloy Azorín as Esteban.

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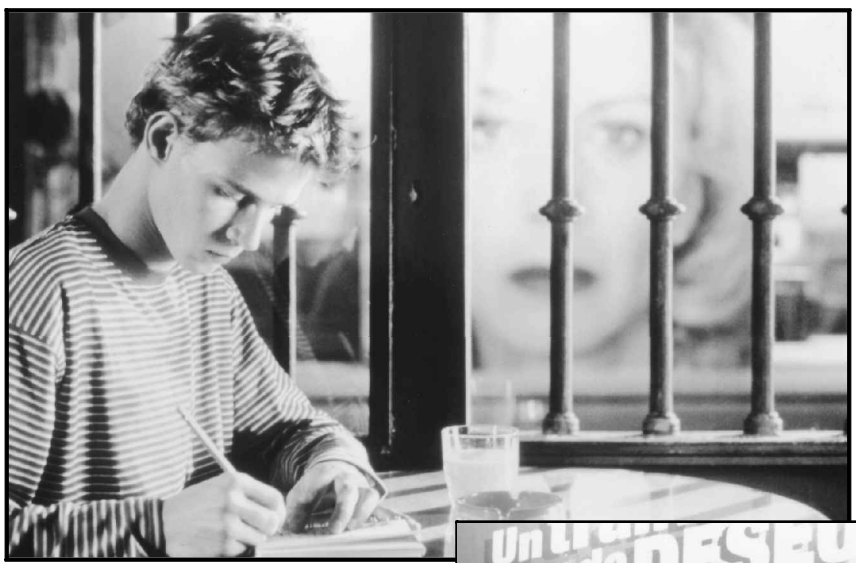
as she searches for the father he never knew. By the end of the film, Manuela is once more the mother of a son called Esteban, also fathered by Lola, but born to Rosa, a nun. However, there is no miraculous rebirth in which death is transcended or falsified. Rather, because of how Manuela acts, new life is found present in the reality of death and the presence she felt about her comes to be embodied once more. It may be that the materialization of the camera and the reembodiment of Esteban are both effects of a process whereby a certain kind of acting which finds its material in absence can sometimes create or realize its own reality. Examination of the various types of acting and role playing undertaken by the film's characters can help isolate the distinctive nature of such a reality-creating performance. *All About My Mother* suggests that women acting as mothers in this way give birth to and sustain life.

A Mother Acting and a Son Writing in the Absence of a Father

Esteban is run over by a car on the night his mother finally agrees to tell him about his father. He was almost run over earlier that same night while distracted by what he calls "an idea." We see him writing in his notebook, and we see what he does as the idea comes to him, but we cannot be sure what this idea is. As Esteban writes, he sees his mother standing on the other side of the street, waiting for him outside the theatre under an enormous portrait of Huma, the actress who is playing Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Esteban perhaps sees that his mother might also be an actress, and that motherhood is a performance by someone who is unknown outside of her role. Manuela had once shown him a photo of herself as an actress, with his father torn out of the image. Was that excision also an act, a deliberate tearing away of everything except the image of herself as an actress playing her part?

We know for certain only that Esteban recorded "All . . ." in his notebook; he writes this after observing that *All About Eve* has been mistranslated into Spanish as *Eve Unveiled*. If Esteban related *All About Eve* to his mother standing under the image of an actress, he might have imagined her as an actress like Eve Harrington—one



A son writing (above); a mother waiting (right)—with portrait of an actress (Marisa Paredes as Huma).

whose drive to act is desperate, whose life is a series of parts driven on by the pain of roles already played and meant only to open the way to more. Her every performance is calculated, but at the same time, made real by the desperate need to perform. A more particular similarity between Eve and Esteban's mother is that both claim to have lost husbands. But Eve's loss was invented to make her seem more vulnerable; Esteban might begin to doubt what Manuela has told him about his father, and to see her as driven by a similar need to reinvent herself for him.

Eve is not only the name of a character who is an actress, but of the archetypal first woman who is the mother of us all. "Eve Unveiled" has an Oedipal connotation of woman known first as mother, an omnipresence that is, for a son, then reduced to and exposed as particular female bodies which can be seen. More generally, an unveiling suggests the stripping away of superficial layers to reveal some essential core. In contrast, "All About . . ." suggests a process of elaboration which is implicitly open-ended. About such a character, story after story can be told.

If Esteban saw his mother as an actress and related this idea to his correction of the film title, he could conclude there is no "Eve" to be "unveiled" but rather the "all about . . . " of a presence which lacks fixed definition and so can be all-embracing—a mother who is an actress, but an actress who becomes a mother as she enacts any and all parts required for her child. There is no reason why this sort of constructive self-transformation should be possible only for women, but in *All About My Mother,* it is only to the extent he or she acts as a woman that a character can be "all about" as a mother. Almodóvar would seem to believe this is also true in life, because the film is dedicated to "all actresses who have played actresses, to all women who act . . . and all people who aspire to being mothers."

Among the film's many characters trying to be women or mothers, there are only two fathers. One, Lola, lives without even knowing he is a father, and is felt only as an absence. The other is unnamed and referred to only as Rosa's father, even by his wife. He is a father who does not remember his child when he sees her. He asks all women the same questions about their age and height, as if to reduce them to the criteria of his sexual desire. Given his geriatric condition, this desire is probably only a memory—and apparently all he remembers. Intentionally or not, Rosa's father acts as if he were God the Father. Nothing can be known of him, nothing remembered except that he questions and judges. This seems to be the film's model for fatherhood, defined by default and in negation. If motherhood is an abiding presence, an open-ended performance, then fathers are a presence aping absence, a familiar unknown.

Esteban is as much the child of his father's absence as of his mother's presence. The aspect of his character most developed in the few scenes before his death is his sensitivity. He is continuously feeling, thinking, and writing. He also reads Truman Capote, has his mother take him to Tennessee Williams plays, and is sure a "big dick" is all that is required to make a living on the street. Esteban is not just artistic; he is probably gay. We can construe this as a consequence of his father's absence and his identification with his mother. However, to see it in Almodóvar's terms, some deviation from conventional masculinity is an inevitable concomitant of any sensitivity or understanding. Attributing Esteban's sensitivity to his father's absence also runs into the irony that his father is a transsexual. Had he known his father and identified with him more thoroughly, it would presumably have made Esteban more, not less, "effeminate."

Almost immediately after expressing a desire to know his father, Esteban is removed from his mother's influence. This realignment echoes the resolution of an Oedipus complex that results in a standard male identity, but here it is an accident that brings death. However, the reworking of Oedipal logic is not the only way to view Esteban's death. If we look at it from the mother's perspective, a life that comes to her newly created, and so in a sense out of the unknown, must eventually move out of her care into the unknown of its future. We might say that all mothers lose their sons to an accident of one kind or another, and we are all like Esteban, fathered by an unknown to which we repeatedly return in passing through life, and definitively through death. It may be that Esteban becomes one with this unknown as he dies on the night of his birthday.

Esteban's Presence in Manuela's Life After the Accident

It is clear from the moment Esteban dies that Manuela feels his continued presence in her life, yet this, instead of consoling her, is rather an unspeakable, unassuageable pain which separates her from life even as she appears to go on with it. Apart from the momentary eruptions of raw, choking emotion triggered by some unanticipated mention of Esteban, all Manuela does seems like an act. Again and again, this act unfailingly

brings to prominence the unbearable sadness over which it is stretched.

The presence that Manuela feels might, in a sense, actually *be* Esteban. The title suggests that the filmic narrative is told from his point of view. Esteban could be writing about his mother having imagined his own death, so that the Manuela we see exists in his imagination. There are hints that we can regard the film in this way. When Manuela tells Esteban she was once an actress, he says, "If you were an actress, I'd write parts for you," and there are many parts for Manuela over the course of the film. We also know that Esteban had begun a story about his mother. He even watched her perform in a transplant simulation. More suggestive still is that the name of his story could just as well be "All About My Mother." We can only read the "All" he writes in his notebook, which is in capital letters above some other writing, as a title would be. Immediately after he finishes writing on the camera, *All About My Mother* appears on the screen, consistent with regarding the film as Esteban's story.

Manuela's story may be seen as unfolding from Esteban's point of view after he is actually dead. Almodóvar suggests this strange possibility with two instances in which Esteban speaks as narrator or voiceover after he has been run over. First, as we see Manuela waiting to receive the news that Esteban is brain dead, he tells us about the special face of boys who live with their mother: their look is serious, like a writer's, but that is normal in his case, "because I am a writer." Then a little later, Manuela stares at Esteban's empty room and we hear him refer to his father as the part of his life that is missing. Perhaps Manuela is remembering reading this in his notebook, but what she hears (or at least, what we hear) is Esteban's voice. Manuela soon leaves Madrid for Barcelona, as if to find the father called for by her son's incomplete—or uncompleted—life. (When she finds this father, Manuela at first tells him that Esteban is in Madrid, "But you can't see him.")

Perhaps Manuela wants to escape Esteban, but she carries him to Barcelona with her. While buying a ticket for a performance of *Streetcar,* she looks out and sees him looking back at her across the road, just as she did when they saw the play in Madrid. His memory joins seamlessly to her surroundings, though now Esteban is no longer smiling and his look is watchful and strange, almost other-worldly. Later, Rosa asks Manuela if she is alone, and Manuela answers, "I guess so," as if unsure. All this suggests that we can regard Esteban as a disembodied presence pervading his mother—not as a ghost, but rather as memory, a medium in which Manuela remains even as she appears to leave it behind. This memory, initially experienced as an overwhelming pain, persists in an abiding sadness.

Apart from the question of whether he is actually dead, if we identify Esteban with the camera as storyteller, we can interpret the image of his writing on the camera while watching *All About Eve* as a representation of his bringing his story to perception. Appearing within the story itself, this image would demonstrate an element of reflexivity or self-reference, so that we might also regard Esteban as writing and imagining himself in imagining his mother. Both he and his mother would then in some sense be created or realized by his writing. That we see him write as he watches *All About Eve* might further suggest that Esteban's notes are an attempt to rewrite a story about women already written elsewhere and translate it into a story about or for his mother.

If Esteban is actually dead and Manuela only imagines she feels his continued presence, she would be recreating him in his absence. It could then be Manuela's own memory of Esteban that writes her story, one that begins in his notes and is completed through the film (just as we may see the title of that story begun in his notes and completed on film). This would have Manuela continue her role as mother, bringing her child to life and recreating her own in the process.

When Esteban was alive, the bond between mother and son might be seen as an attempt to recreate each other so as to exclude a father. But if this bond persists in some form after Esteban's death, it involves more than an Oedipal rejection of the father's role. It seems more like a sustained attempt at recreating each other so as to exclude or deny absence itself, first that of Esteban's father, then of Esteban himself.

Because Manuela is unable to choose or order the roles in which she finds herself, she can only recreate Esteban through the movement that she is forced to make, out of memory, back into time, and toward others. This means that the Esteban she has lost cannot be recovered in the form of a simple repetition. The Esteban born to Rosa late in the film cannot be Manuela's Esteban, because Manuela cannot make Esteban live again, but it may be that she can act so that he lives anew.

We cannot be sure whether or not Esteban is actually dead, whether he writes all about his mother, or whether she finds new life in and for his memory. This becomes less like an uncertainty over mutually exclusive alternatives and more like an opening-out of possibilities if we regard others as being "all about"

the performances they sustain, rather than as having distinct identities which exist apart from their acts and the relationships these acts create. We can see Esteban as all about his mother, writing her and himself, as she can be all about him, recreating him and herself. Death must introduce irrevocable loss into, and necessarily change, this relationship, but death need not end it. However convincing this metaphysics may be, the film's focus is on the more practical question of what can heal the schism at the heart of an experience such as Manuela's, in which unassuaged pain persists apart from a life that seems like an act.

Relationships Between Acting and Living

Manuela's life in Barcelona continually forces her to play various roles—Stella in *Streetcar* for one night, and mother to Rosa during her pregnancy—and brings her into contact with others acting or playing roles. Much of the relationship between characters develops through their acting out of parts in a shared text—*Streetcar*. For instance, Huma (who plays Blanche) can't help telling Manuela that she has always relied on the kindness of strangers, and proceeds to coopt Manuela into her life. Manuela had already played Stella before: it was then that she met Lola, who was playing Kowalski, and left him (as Stella left Kowalski).

What is the significance of all this acting? First, we need to recognize it is not therapeutic. The sequence of events in *All About My Mother* that best fits the therapeutic model brings Manuela no relief. Esteban was run over while trying to obtain Huma's autograph after a performance of *Streetcar*; and Manuela, after returning to Barcelona, goes backstage to see the same actress after the same play, as if to repeat the event. It's not really clear what she intends, but she has a photo of Esteban with her, and perhaps means to pretend she is a fan and have Huma autograph it for her son. The attempted reenactment becomes lost in the randomness of events and only leads Manuela into playing another part, as Huma's personal assistant. Still, Huma does eventually call on Manuela to explain herself, so that a partial repetition of the events surrounding the trauma comes to be followed, after a lag, by a kind of confession. This meets the requirements of the "talking cure," but no truth is unveiled, because there is none in an accident, and Manuela's pain is untouched.

Yet something is changed by Manuela's acting as if there is a connection to Huma that involves Esteban. A connection is actually made, and it is one Huma recognizes. When she finds out about Esteban, she gives Manuela her autograph, addressed to Esteban. Huma acts for Manuela as if Esteban was still alive, because she recognizes that, for Manuela, he is. Huma's acting as if Esteban is alive for Manuela makes him live for

Acting as a mother: Huma, with Manuela (in background)

Being, and acting as, mothers: Sister Rosa (Penélope Cruz, left) with Manuela

her too. She even sees Esteban desperate for her autograph in the rain, this memory of him fused with her present as it is for Manuela. How alive Esteban is for Huma becomes clear later in the film, when she is rehearsing the part of a mother who has lost a child. Her understanding of the part is almost visceral as she immerses herself in her dead son's blood.

Acting here seems to have a kind of creative power, its "as if . . ." sometimes making real a part of what is simulated. However, its effect is as uncontrollable and ambiguous as the reality of which it becomes a part. And most of the acting undertaken by characters in the film leaves reality untouched, even when it gives voice to real feeling. The agonized cry of Manuela when playing Stella in labor is the same as the cry she gives when she sees her son run over, a pain that charges her performance. Although the audience is clearly affected, Manuela is only playing the part as written, and we hear her cry persisting unanswered over the empty stage after the actors have moved off. In fact, the same pain finds eventual expression in all Manuela's performances in Barcelona, but rather than being vitalized, they are ruptured by it. For instance, when Manuela takes on the part of Rosa's mother, she seems to be herself in the role until asked by Rosa's actual mother if she has children. Manuela unthinkingly says yes, then can only say that her son died. Reminded that she is Esteban's mother and not Rosa's, she breaks down.

Huma has made acting her life, but this, far from creating anything real, seems to have made her unreal. She says she began smoking to imitate Bette Davis, but that in her life, there has only been smoke. Huma identifies herself *as* smoke (Sp. *humo)* rather than as one who makes smoke. She is not to be found in the smoke of her performances as their creator, rather she *is* smoke, a series of performances, emanations without substance or distinctiveness.

In contrast to Huma, the reality of the transsexual Agrado is her endless performances. She scorns drag queens as mere "circus" or "mime," and part of what makes Agrado different is that her performance is embodied. But that is still not enough, because embodied performance might be seen simply as a sum of the "mime" of drag and bodily reconfiguration. What makes Agrado "authentic," as she proclaims herself, is that her acting makes her resemble who she dreams she is. (Put this way, authenticity is not an absolute state, but a matter of degree.) More broadly, Agrado believes in making people's lives more agreeable. She names herself after an ethic that she enacts, rather than after her acts of simulation, like Huma (Sp. *agrado*= agreeable). All this means that although Agrado draws on the same script as Manuela playing Stella and Huma playing Blanche, her performances have a consistent style and logic of their own which makes them something other than imitation and repetition. And because

they express her "dream" of herself, what her acting gives reality to is herself.

This kind of performance is not depicted idealistically, either in its intent or effect. The only idealist in the film is Rosa. Dedicated as a nun to helping others, she performs this role with innocence and heart, and the result is that she is in constant need of help. Performances are motivated, and motives, once they are successfully enacted, cannot be innocent. That is why there will always be more to actresses than whatever reality they want or manage to create, always a story to be told all about them.

Acting to Recreate Life

Characters in *All About My Mother* are at their most "authentic" when acting as mothers. In this role, the memory and pain that drives them find an expression that is sustained and creative. Huma stops playing Blanche over and over, and breaks free of Nina (who plays Stella to her on stage and Kowalski offstage) when she takes on the part of a mother who has lost her son. Having known such a mother and become, albeit through an accident, the cause of her loss gives this role reality for Huma. Agrado's "agreeableness" gives her performance as a woman something like a maternal quality that distinguishes it from Lola's, whose life is a series of dramas without effect—except incidentally, in the two sons born to women who play Stella to his Kowalski. The succession of roles Manuela plays in Barcelona—moving from attempted reenactment of the past, to acting in a play as a woman becoming a mother, to acting as mother to someone else's child—reaches a conclusion only when she becomes mother to Rosa's child after the nun's death.

Huma, rehearsing her new part, is told by the director, "The sadness should go into your hands. Work, you have to work." Driven by grief, she is bound to lose herself in work, but this work can be a working-at: at putting sadness in motion. Similarly, in the face of death, Manuela only goes on acting, but her acting is productive. It brings renewed life, unintentionally and indirectly (and so, in a sense, accidentally), through her acting as Rosa's mother and carrying Rosa through her pregnancy. In the role of mother, both Rosa and Manuela create reality in the most literal sense, working to give birth to a life which they then go on acting to sustain.

After Rosa dies (either giving birth or from the AIDS virus transmitted by Lola), Manuela must act as, and so becomes, the mother of Rosa's child, who is also named Esteban. Again, the causal relation between acting and becoming, performance and reality, is not necessary, but seems almost unavoidable. When Manuela played Stella in labor, the recurrent pain of separation from her child through accident was momentarily and inconsequentially aligned with that of giving birth, but they become, and remain, one pain at the heart of her renewed role as mother.

While Rosa can refer to her pregnancy as "an accident," there is a dimension of religious symbolism to her son's birth. He seems like Manuela's Esteban resurrected in (or transplanted into) a new life, one Rosa hopes will be "the definitive one" for Manuela. His father is something of a mystery, while his mother, a nun, can be said to be married to God. The three Estebans (Lola is also named Esteban) align with the Trinity, with Lola as the absent yet omnipresent Father, Manuela's Esteban as a kind of inspiring Holy Spirit, and the third Esteban as the Son who redeems life from death. As the third Esteban (Rosa's son) miraculously "negativizes" the AIDS virus inherited from his father, we might say the death Lola bore within him and transmitted to those he touched (to the extent that Manuela calls him an "epidemic") is "negated" by transformation into its opposite, continued life. His death, like that of Esteban, is redeemed and subsumed back into life, but only as it becomes part of the material through which life is enacted and reenacted.

Before Lola dies, Manuela shows him his son by Rosa, then gives him their son's notebook and photo. She has Lola read the passage from Esteban's notebook which calls out for his father, so that Esteban finds a new voice through his writing, and with it, the father he sought.

The camera aligns itself with Esteban's gaze out from the photo as Lola kisses it (consistent with regarding the film itself as this gaze made animate). The actual kiss is unseen in the absence of an image as Lola's lips fill the screen. Then a door opens and Manuela enters with a baby in her arms. We might regard this as the representation of a memory Lola does not have, of something he did not see—Manuela, years ago, beginning her life in Madrid with Esteban as her newborn child. It more clearly relates to an earlier shot of Manuela entering the same house. The first time, Manuela enters Rosa's family home with Rosa's mother, having come from her funeral. She is dressed like the mother who has lost a child, in black (right down to her dark sunglasses). But when she reenters the house after Lola's kiss, there is no grieving mother, and bright colors have replaced the black uniform of mourning. And now her first words identify Lola as

the father of this Esteban. These differences suggest that Lola's theatrical, emotion-charged kiss may be one of those performances through which some changed reality is accessed.

One change is that Lola's children now have a father whose relation to them involves something other than accident and absence. But Lola may himself be changed by his act. In kissing Esteban's photo, he joins himself to the image of his son gazing back at him and so becomes the object of a gaze from an unknowable other. This implies a significant dislocation from the way Lola has lived, for himself, with his eye on his image of himself. One possible sign of a change in Lola is that he passes on Esteban's photo to Huma, suggesting it was more than a prop momentarily used in his dramatization of himself. The photo becomes part of what connects an actress playing a mother to the reality of that role, as it may have allowed Lola to make real his role as father despite, and perhaps in, his own absence.

When the screen is blank in the kiss, Lola may be stripped of his image of himself, much as Manuela and Esteban are dislodged from their established identities by Esteban's death. In both instances, there is a loss or alteration of perspective that results in the circumvention of distance and visible, spatial relation for the characters. And this is what we experience as audience, literally and momentarily as Lola's kiss engulfs the screen, and emotionally and continuously as we feel Esteban still with his mother through the film.

In *All About My Mother,* whatever is unseen in a transsexual's kiss and unread in a son's writing persists and remains at work through the mothers who continually rescue it and carry it on past death. It persists in some notes that are left to be imagined, and in the image of a son that a mother gives away. If the son's mother only returns his image to his unknown father, this return unexpectedly sets the image on a new journey in which it finds an actress. With this image and her memory of a mother's loss, she creates a performance that lives, even if she herself is only as substantial as smoke. Perhaps coincidentally, the actress may have suggested to the son an idea that led him to write. If so, this would mark out a circle through whose turning is written and enacted a life so close to accident it may be reborn out of one.

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The King Is Alive

Director: Kristian Levring. Producers: Patricia Kruijer, Vibeke Windelov. Writers: Levring, Anders Thomas Jensen (with inspiration from *King Lear*). Cinematographer: Jens Schlosser. IFC Films.

World cinema has been newly enriched by *The King Is Alive,* a Dogma 95 production crafted by Kristian Levring, one of the founders of the Danish movement. Unfortunately the film, despite its great merits, is imperiled by the shadow of the Dogma manifesto. In 1995, the Dogma filmmakers tacked to the door of the Hollywood cathedral a set of ten "revolutionary" theses that proclaimed their intention to reject the illusionist magic associated with Hollywood's commercial output: sets, artificial lighting, non-diegetic sound, lens filters, black-and-white film stock, even cameras mounted on dollies and cranes. The group's self-labeling as dogmatic was generally received as an incendiary gesture, and, by distributing its set of ten rules of filmmaking with its press kits for each new film, the Dogma group keeps the fire burning. It obsessively reiterates its commitment to strip away from film culture the current overlay of kitsch technology and paraphernalia and to counter "the film illusion by the presentation of an indisputable set of rules." Ironically, the bold—many would say infamous—manifesto has been a greater source of critical discussion than the small number of films produced by the group, among them *Mifune,* a romantic comedy by Soren Kragh Jacobsen; *Celebration* (*Festen)* by Thomas Vinterberg; and the more prolific output of Lars Von Trier, which includes *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*. (Von Trier has complicated the group's credibility with the arguably illusionist rhetoric of both *Waves* and *Dancer,* and by producing a thoroughly hallucinogenic television series, *The Kingdom,* outside of the Dogma canon.)

Much attention has been paid to the perceived self-righteousness of the Dogma 95 project, which has drawn ridicule despite the filmmakers' claims that there is a certain amount of humor and irony in their declarations. On the whole, many critics appear not to have gotten the joke, whatever it may be; the manifesto has created a climate of pre-judgment. Nevertheless, the problem of the escapist aspects of Hollywood films and their domination of mass entertainment *is* a legitimate concern among filmmakers and critics alike. And *The King Is Alive* is such a powerful film, such a bold revisioning of cinematic storytelling and of the illusionist nature of human constructs of social and personal reality, that it may well be time to move critical commentary beyond its focus on the Dogma rules.

Why does the Dogma 95 "vow of chastity" strike knowledgeable cinephiles as either obvious, hypocritical, or absurd? The director's name is dutifully omitted from the credits of each Dogma film, but each of the four directors has been recognized in reviews and promotional material, and Lars Von Trier routinely makes an unashamed self-promotional spectacle of himself. *Cineaste* (July 1999), in a lucid and incisive editorial, sums up objections to the manifesto, suggesting that its petty antagonism against rather commonplace dramatic techniques is hardly a guarantee of more realistic films, and pointing out that the Dogma rules are more repetitive of previous cinematic developments—like the French New Wave and Italian Neorealism—than they are radically new. The editorial incisively and lucidly blasts the Dogma rules as "a cynical ploy . . . to draw attention" to the films made by these self-proclaimed rebels. It is hard to argue with either *Cineaste*'s perspective on history or with the editorial's relevance to the often tasteless, attention-seeking bombast of Lars Von Trier. And yet . . . On the whole, there remains a gap between rules and films. More to the point, Levring's new film, the best Dogma production to date in its rejection of schematic thinking and its strong visual storytelling, is an ironic addition to a family of films put forth under the rubric of anything so narrowly defined as a manifesto.

The film tells of an incident (fictional) in which eleven people are stranded in a remote section of the North African desert after the compass breaks and their bus veers from the road into a boundless, uncharted terrain of sand, sun, and wind. As a Dogma anti-illusionist, Levring dutifully shot his film on location in the Namibian desert for six weeks in the heat of June and July. The incidents that subsequently occur are thus charged by what the camera records as the parched, unrelieved waterlessness of a terrain that burns itself into the lives of these strangers (ten passengers and the bus driver) suddenly thrown together for survival. "Incident" is a word I feel forced to use for lack of a better, but it fails to convey the complex nuancing of the narrative focus of *The King Is Alive.* For here, story is a concept entertained by the characters but not by the film, which is itself an indeterminate confluence of story ideas and human and natural forces that indeed benefits from the location shooting but is primarily a triumph of innovative narrative fluidity.

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Photo Anders Overgard

Survivors: stranded in the desert

The "events" that push the stranded passengers to their limits and beyond, killing and curing pitilessly, are dreamlike, a mirage of the desert, never actually present to the audience but only seemingly so. Because the filmic world is an eternal present, the travails of the characters are vibrant and immediate, and yet they are recollections rendered in flashback by an old African named Kanana (Peter Kubheka). (Flashback is a violation of the Dogma rules, here a fortunate fall from purity.) Kanana is the only person in the film who does not speak any English. Levring is unexpectedly working with a cast of British, American, and Canadian actors—except for Romane Bohringer as Catherine, a vindictive French intellectual who speaks whose linguistic difference is an organic part of her isolation from the Anglo characters. With English established as the norm, Kanana's words become unmistakable signs of difference and otherness, and are conveyed through the conventions of film that bespeak otherness: subtitles and voiceover. Thus the agon in the desert is uniquely presented as the Other's vision of the dominant culture's experience (I cannot think of another instance in which a film's narrator speaks a marginalized language).

Kanana could not be more marginal. He is a member of a culture that is peripheral to dominant, white, Western societies, and he himself is peripheral even to African culture. He is a lone squatter on the site where the bus runs out of gas: the ruins of a small group of prefabricated buildings abandoned by the German army after World War II. Nevertheless, Kanana is privileged for the audience as the bracketing voice of the film and as the first voice we hear. *The King Is Alive* emphasizes his unusual centrality by allowing him a voice almost uniquely in relationship to the audience; only on rare occasions does he speak diegetically to the passengers and the bus driver. The deployment of the language of the narrator as a singularly "foreign" element in the film works to define words and all they imply as a form of otherness and to support Levring's commitment to the visual nature of film. At the same time, this defamiliarized form of narrative voiceover conveys the hallucinatory disorientation of the Westerners. In some ways, the entire dysfunctional European idyll in the desert exists only in the desert of Kanana's very minimalist memory, made manifest in his voiceover narrative (which arguably breaks the second Dogma commandment prohibiting non-diegetic sound).

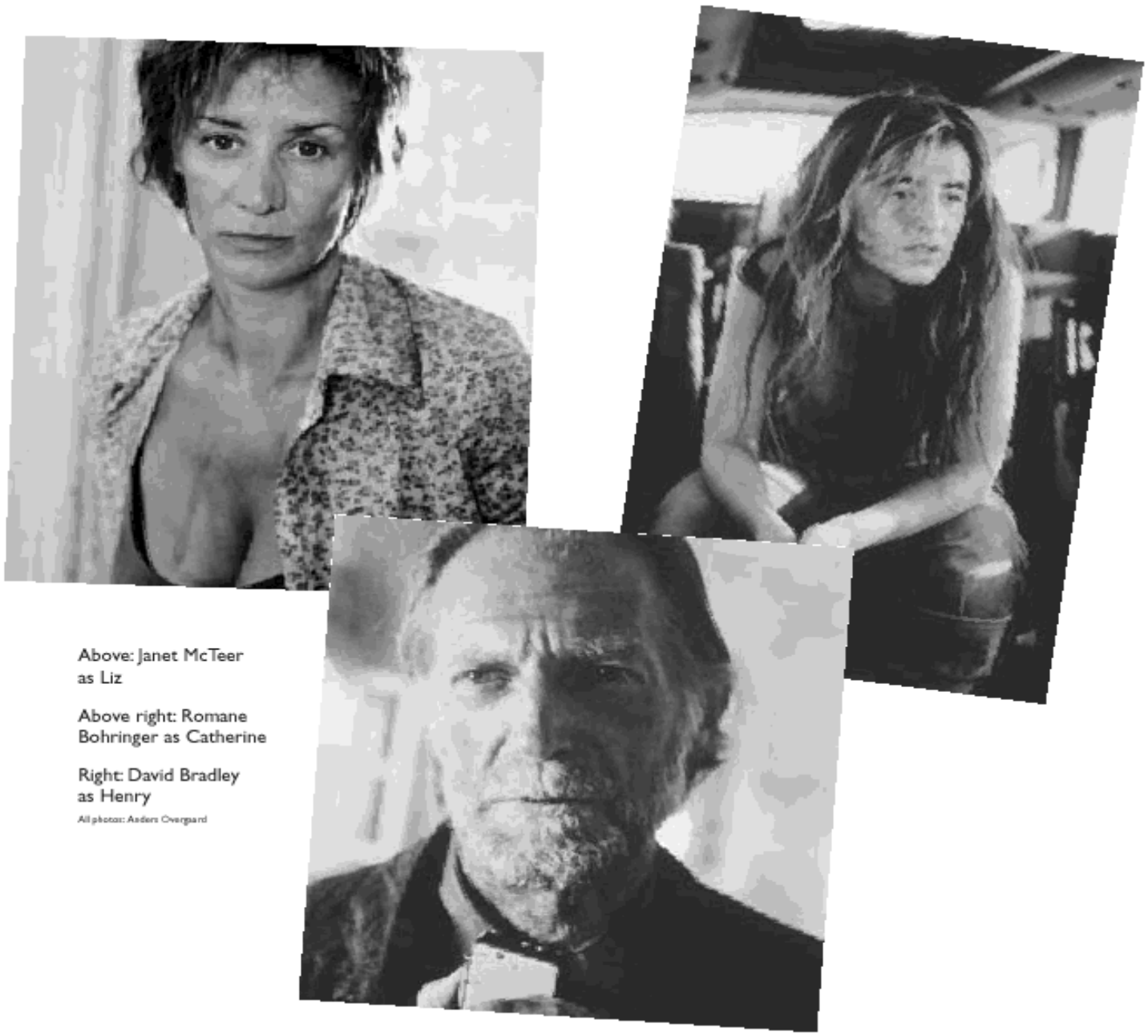
But Kanana does not entirely define the plight of the lost travelers; his narration is spare, and punctuates the silent witness of the camera. Their ordeal is primarily located in the images of the camera "eye," which is separate from Kanana, showing scenes that he never witnessed and giving us a visual terrain that goes beyond the capacity of an individual person. The camera eye is located nowhere and everywhere, moving

Left: Jennifer Jason Leigh as Gina

Above: Bruce Davison as Ray

fitfully from earth to sky, evoking the perspective of a deity and a source of knowledge that doesn't need translation. Thus Kanana is ultimately not the intelligence that contains the film, as is so often the role of a narrator, but a sibylline voice empowered to take language as far as it can go—not very far in this context—in rendering linguistic commentary on a trauma that is primarily a form of revelation.

On a narrative level, the way might seem to be cleared for a comparatively trite international survival story, but this survival aspect serves only as a narrative anchor; it is by no means the aspect of the film that makes it worthy of sustained attention. True to the traditions of this somewhat familiar narrative formula, the stranded group is appropriately heterogeneous and its members are disconnected from one another when they arrive at the "nowhere" of the film. Seemingly they are positioned to let this time in the wilderness reveal something about the absurdity of cultural forms. Ultimately, though, there is nothing predictable about



Above: Janet McTeer as Liz

Above right: Romane Bohringer as Catherine

Right: David Bradley as Henry

All photos: Anders Overgaard

Levring's treatment of this tried-and-true dramatic situation, although the exposition seems at moments to point toward a few fairly well-worn paths. For example, because Moses, the bus driver, is a black African, played by a black African actor (Vusi Kunene) and the passengers on the bus are all Caucasians marked by the neuroses and racism of Western society, some viewers will expect an update of the class inversions of James Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton,* especially when the stolid, competent black driver is surrounded by towering, contemptuous, and vaguely threatening white men. Later, the film tantalizes with suggestions that it will update *King Lear,* as the bored yet terrified group agrees to perform the play at the instigation of Henry (David Bradley), an Englishman with a long career behind him as an actor and director who writes out the script in longhand, from memory. The *King Lear* gambit seems especially relevant when Gina (Jennifer Jason Leigh), a sexually attractive, sweetly vague, countercultural American, is poisoned by Catherine in

a replication of the persecution of Cordelia by her wicked sisters—until one remembers that it was not Cordelia but Regan who was poisoned, and by her sister Goneril. Indeed, nothing ordinary comes of either the implicit allusion to *Crichton* or the explicit allusion to *Lear*. *The King Is Alive* is not a retread; rather it is an original, epic vision built on the tensions among the implacable endurance of nonhuman nature, the dark depths of unfathomable human nature, and the discontinuity of human culture, a discontinuity composed of fragments of our technology and our stories and the microchips of our class and racial prejudices. The film begins with the illusion of logical coherence and ends with the discovery of a deep, ambiguous human interconnection that survives all myopia, cruelty, betrayals, and failed narratives.

Not that *The King Is Alive* is an exuberantly affirmative film. Human connection is not limitless in value, and survival is a mixed blessing. Kanana begins by telling us that the ephemeral tenure of the strangers in his life was marked by their fear, that they never stopped being afraid. Kanana's evocation of fear naturally appears to refer to their battle with an inhospitable environment, but the word soon, and permanently, takes on larger meaning. Life is a fearful business: fear of being where you are; fear of not being where you are supposed to be and of others being there instead; fear of both not arriving at a destination and of arriving; fear of satisfying and of not satisfying desire; fear of both peril and rescue. If the king is alive, that is the most we can say.

The passengers are all fuel for the human conflagrations and situations that erupt during the ordeal and blast away the initial "stuckness" of this crew and their resistance to any but the most perfunctory relationships. Perfunctory to the point of cliché is the trio of Paul, Amanda, and Charles. Macho Brit Paul (Chris Walker), an easily recognizable type—the crude bourgeois—is on a vacation with his hysterically timid wife Amanda (Lia Williams), another seeming type—the clinging-vine Englishwoman. Accompanying them is Charles (David Calder), Paul's overbearing father, as crude as Paul but somewhat more cultivated in appearance. Paul's constant need to prove himself a man to the disdainful, bullying Charles via his domination of Amanda plays out the stereotypical Oedipal relationship. Affluent, sophisticated Liz (Janet McTeer) and her equally smooth husband Ray (Bruce Davison), each handsome and suave with the grace of California's new rich, share a familiar tormented sadomasochistic marriage going nowhere. Henry, a cultivated, bearded gentleman actor and director; radiantly blonde, voluptuous hippie Gina; and cerebral, dark, skinny Left Bank-denizen Catherine embody individualist clichés, each isolated in his or her own inner world. Moses, a warmly appealing man, is the typical permanent outsider, alienated from the group for racial reasons. Ashley (Brion James), a self-important, hysterical American businessman, and Jack (Miles Anderson), a stiff-upper-lip, wiry, resourceful former soldier, hover on the fringes of the group, each in his own way the distillation of recognizable patterns of alienation and the sterility of individualism that to some degree afflict them all.

When Henry proposes that this group of people, who are stranded in more ways than one, work on a production of *King Lear,* the specter and the promise of relationship that reaches beyond cliché open up. This play-within-a-movie is central to the film, and is likely to send viewers scurrying to find parallels. That kind of reliance on convention and the roots of culture, however, is precisely what this film opposes. It is the act, the process of narration, not the Shakespearean content, that is catalytic. The film's title tells us as much. In the play, Lear dies. The vitality of "the king" in the film is not the content of the Shakespeare play, but the play's ability to confer on the almost hopeless group a continuous, collaborative, spontaneous, humanizing *act* of narrative, the foundation of human community.

The narrative process almost immediately excludes the intractable individualists, as within the film's first 15 minutes Jack, as the most desert-savvy of the group, appoints himself as the one to try to reach the next village, about 150 miles away, where help and rescue might await. He disappears from the narrative process and dies mysteriously in the desert, arguably a casualty of his lone-wolf inability to become a part of the human tradition of storytelling. Soon after, a heart attack forces the egotistically self-consumed Ashley to forfeit the role of Lear. It is appropriate that this narcissist has heart problems; even his survival leaves him coldly detached from his fellow passengers. The others mill around Henry, incompetently struggling with the rehearsals. And soon the problems they have brought to this barren place erupt in new and terrible/wonderful ways.

The fatal interconnection among Catherine, Gina, and Henry is one of the most terrible consequences of the group's foray into the communal relationship forced on it by the desert; they form a triad that exemplifies the oxymorons of human connection, the futil-

ity of attempting to see the film as an allegory of *Lear,* and the shabby inauthenticity of elitism. Catherine attempts to recreate a traditional hierarchy of value by rejecting Henry's offer of the role of Cordelia, contemptuously telling him that her fellow passengers are not up to the required acting standard—a gesture that she hopes will ally her with the cultivated actor/director. But Henry does not take up that gambit and offers the role to Gina. As the luminous, affectionate Gina works hard and achieves a warm relationship with Henry, her success grates on Catherine's overcultivated nerves. She assuages her envy by tricking Gina into eating fatally contaminated food. Although the others never know of Catherine's monstrous act, the depth of her unexpected remorse for her deed after Gina's death integrates her into the group. The sacrifice of Gina redeems Catherine's humanity, and she joins the circle mourning the death of the young American, a silent event in which her linguistic issues are burned away along with everyone's interior isolation and Gina's body on the funeral pyre.

The death of innocence is inextricably fused with the process of humanization in connection with the role of Cordelia, but it does not grow allegorically from Shakespeare's narrative logic. Henry is certainly a paternal Lear figure, but not as a self-involved fool who wants to retain power while placing responsibility in his daughter's hands: he is a patient caretaker who self-effacingly bears with his feckless cast, moving them one step at a time toward performance and occasionally stunning them with his eloquent delivery of the lines as a model of how dramatic empathy really works. It is the process of narrative, not the content, that is continuous, powerful, and foregrounded by the film.

Similarly, Gina does not inhabit this group as a perfect echo of Cordelia (who exists in Shakespeare's play as a pure victim of covetousness); she also exists as an ambiguous sexual force, which moves her character beyond any simple comparison with Cordelia. Her troubling sexuality is established most starkly in connection with Charles, who initially mocks Henry's project, but agrees to take the role of Gloucester when Gina asks him to, and then proceeds to define himself as the opposite of the Shakespearean "good old man" by striking a secret compact with Gina. He will take the part only if "I get to fuck you." Her complicity potentially tarnishes her character, making her seem suddenly more promiscuous than childlike in her sexuality. However, later, as she writhes in physical agony from the ravages of the poison in her system, Gina reveals that she has deliberately played on Charles's macho fantasies. She answers his attempts to minister to her by telling him that she had only agreed to his bargain to humiliate him for his bullying self-deceit. Unable to recover from this deathblow to his patriarchal ego, Charles obscenely turns on her, urinating into her mouth. It would seem that he thereby kills her by suffocating her, though that is not as clear as the fact that she is discovered dead, along with his own corpse. Charles has hanged himself. Never a real participant in the humanizing act of narrative, he definitively cuts himself off from community by erasing himself from the process when the story punctures his narcissism. Thus while the guilt for Gina's death rests both with Charles and Catherine, redemption is possible only for the latter, who mysteriously and unexpectedly finds her way into the communal process.

So scrambled is the *Lear* parallel by Gina's involvement with Charles that it alone might scuttle a Shakespearean reading of the film. But the film's assertion of its radically non-traditional attitudes toward narrative is further strengthened by its other story strands, notably those concerning Liz and Amanda, who play Regan and Goneril, respectively; Liz's husband Ray, who plays Albany; Moses, who plays Edmund; and Amanda's bullying, shallow husband, Paul, who ironically plays the "good son," Edgar. Decent, hardworking Moses, the antithesis of Edmund, is used by Liz to sexually taunt her husband as they rehearse their scenes. She openly flirts with Moses and creates the impression that they are lovers, consciously exploiting the lurking racism of the men in the group in a vain attempt to coerce him into providing sexual service on demand. Yet Liz/Regan's heinous instigation of destructive social narratives unexpectedly leads out of the cultural dead end we might expect.

Although it is clear to the audience that Moses has refused to play Liz's humiliating game, Paul is, predictably, driven to extremes by the appearance of miscegenation. He is on the verge of killing Moses when the apparently passive Amanda, the antithesis of the Goneril character she plays, suddenly intervenes, informing him of her revulsion at his so-called manly behavior and reducing him to tears. Similarly, Ray, predictably unable to stand Liz's taunting any longer, heads out into the desert, but is deflected from his suicidal behavior when he comes upon Jack's corpse. Ray returns to the compound and to a much transformed Liz, who now welcomes her husband back with real passion and affection, her penchant for sexual degradation and sadism purged after her old narrative has

imploded in terror at Ray's departure. Clearly, the contact forced upon all these disparate souls by the play has created not an imitation of previous art, but the occasion for, the impetus for, the necessity for a new set of narratives. These new narratives reach their final form in speechlessness as the survivors sit around Gina's funeral pyre, a cohesive, if disturbing, fellowship at last. The arrival of their rescuers evokes from them only a mute, collegial look of intermingled despair and incomprehension.

Because ordinary concepts of narrative (and thus coherence) are recast by Levring as catalytic agents by means of which complex communal processes are generated, the new set of narratives in *The King Is Alive* cannot be confined by anything so limited as an ordinary plot. The new narratives are as ineffable as the secret places within the vulnerable, unfetishized body that can best be represented by the kind of stripped-down modes of cinematic technique espoused by the Dogma manifesto. And the invisible seared souls of the marooned passengers which emerge implicitly through Levring's audacious handling of narrative are given a visible surface through a thoroughly unfetishized representation of their bodies. It is in the realm of the senses that some credibility can be given to the Dogma project. Much of Levring's address to the audience is through the kind of representation of the human body and the body of the world that is almost impossible in commercial Hollywood films. Levring seems to purge the voyeuristic distance between the human body and the camera. Shooting in digital video which he later transferred to a 35mm film format, he fills the screen with a grainy image that conveys baking flesh unalloyed by make-up or any other technique of glamorization. The collision between the "artlessness" of naked, raw human skin and the exquisite composition of the film frames creates a riveting tension between art and immediacy that rhymes with the tension between the cultural narrative of *King Lear* and the ineffable human forces at play in the "actors" who enter and are entered by the roles.

Ultimately, *The King Is Alive* strips the audience of its defenses as inexorably as it strips its characters. It reacquaints us with the mystery of what it is to be human, while refusing to reassure us of the nobility of our kind, or of any comforting continuity between deed and consequence. We are story-making animals. We rely on the old narratives that attempt to speak of nobility and continuity, but they bend before the forces of living impulse, fusing with our vagaries to form ever new and unpredictable combinations and permutations of desires. Because the places that the characters inhabit in the process of narration are touched but not determined by class and ethnicity, their part in the narrative is easier to describe than to explain. This ineffability is the core of the film's potential to evoke awe and wonder at who we are, but its mystical force leaves this imaginative and daring work at the mercy of the audience, vulnerable always to the kind of literalism that will mistake the part for the whole and explain it through the *Lear* story. Such oversimplification will only misconstrue *The King Is Alive,* which most resembles the *Lear* narrative in that it too is formed and reformed by the same power that pulsates behind the events of the Shakespearean play: the social implications of the enigmas that lie at the core of the human heart.

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Jia Hongsheng as Mardar and Zhou Xun as Meimei

Suzhou River

Director/Writer: Lou Ye. Producers: Nai An, Philippe Bober. Cinematographer: Wang Yu. Strand Releasing.

Love is a story you tell yourself—about yourself, about the one you love, and about your lives together. But we want love never to end, while a story, a narrative, must come to an end, or else it is not a story. Does that make love a special kind of story, or is love the arena where we can see storytelling working against itself, undercutting its own narratives? *Suzhou River*, the second film by 35-year-old Chinese director Lou Ye, sinks deep into these questions, not only addressing them but taking them in, taking them on.

As one might expect from a movie about narrative working against itself, the plot of *Suzhou River* is slippery. There are, it seems, two pairs of lovers. The first pair, whose story begins years before the main action of the movie, is Moudan (Zhou Xun), indeterminate in age but girlish in her pigtails, and Mardar (Jia Hongsheng), a silent, withdrawn motorcycle courier. He is hired to take Moudan to a relative's house whenever her father has an assignation. Mardar lives for the mobility, the endless motion, of the motorcycle—off-duty, he sits immobile on his sofa and watches videos—and he is valuable to his shady employers because he tells no tales (we will see this thematic pairing of mobility and story elsewhere too). Eventually, he notices Moudan's love, and returns it, but when his employers tell him to kidnap her and hold her until they collect a ransom from her father, he obeys; when he releases her, she runs off and jumps into the Suzhou River. He dives in after her, but cannot find her.

The other two lovers are the unnamed male narrator of the movie and Meimei (Zhou Xun again, in a great double performance). Meimei swims around a tank of water in the local bar, wearing a mermaid outfit and a blond wig; without the wig, she looks exactly like Moudan, as Mardar discovers when he shows up at the bar years after Moudan's jump and halfway through the movie. Meimei's costume even matches a mermaid doll which Mardar gave Moudan for her birthday—matches it exactly, right down to the blue nail polish and eyeshadow. Mardar, of course, tries to get Meimei to admit she is really Moudan so that their love story can resume, and Meimei begins to respond to Mardar's attentions.

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Caught in these and other ambiguities (the two love stories blur together and the doubling gets increasingly complicated), close to half the reviews I have read get even the plot summary wrong. Or maybe it's just all those six-letter M—— names. The critics are unanimous, however, in citing Hitchcock's *Vertigo* as the major influence on *Suzhou River*, and one can see why: a man is obsessed with a blonde/brunette in whom he sees the woman of his past who apparently fell to her death; he wants to replay the story of his love with a different ending, but the ending is instead repeated, and made all too final. Several critics point out that the score of *Suzhou River* contains allusions to Bernard Herrmann's score for *Vertigo*. And even minor details in *Suzhou River* pay homage to *Vertigo*: greenish neon through the window during the pair's crucial dialogue; someone who dies in a cop chase across the rooftops. At least that's what we're told happens to him—we don't see it ourselves; like the other references to *Vertigo*, this one is kept glancing. The reviews may all bring up the resemblances to *Vertigo*, but the better ones go on to stress the differences. *Suzhou River* is not a remake, like *Psycho* (1998) for *Psycho* (1960) or *Point of No Return* and *Black Cat* for *La Femme Nikita* or even *The Magnificent Seven* for *Seven Samurai*—it revitalizes its "source," riffs on it, makes it new.

Even the *Vertigo* structure—the main point of similarity between the movies—is made much more complex in *Suzhou River*. *Vertigo* is a V: poor Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes) loves John Ferguson (Jimmy Stewart), while he is obsessed only with Madeleine Elster (Kim Novak). The women have nothing to do with each other—Midge's attempt to make herself correspond with Elster, in the self-portrait she paints, is a disaster—and the structure is programmatic: love is female and ineffectual, while obsession is male and deadly. In *Suzhou River*, on the other hand, there are two interrelated pairs, and the psychologies cross gender lines: both Moudan and the narrator are in love; both Meimei and Mardar are obsessed. Mardar wants to recreate Meimei as his lost Moudan, while Meimei falls under the spell of Mardar's love story and into the same trap; she is devastated when she learns that Mardar really did love Moudan, not her ("I thought it was just a story," she laments), and she tries to turn the narrator into Mardar just as Mardar had tried to turn her into Moudan (and just as Johnny in *Vertigo* tries to turn Judy Barton back into Madeleine Elster). "If I leave you someday, would you look for me? Like Mardar? Would you look for me forever? Your whole life?" Meimei asks the narrator in a voiceover at the start of the movie, and the scene is replayed at the end, just before she runs away. Her farewell note says, "Find me if you love me."

Lou Ye's most important reinventions involve the existence of this narrator, and the nature of his response to Meimei. The narrator does more than give the voiceover common to many other movies: in *Suzhou River*, the jittery, skittering handheld camera is his eye; we never see his face, though his hands sometimes reach into the field of view. He is a videographer ("Pay me and I'll shoot it"), and several scenes are explicitly what he is filming. On the other hand, sometimes both of his hands come into view, or the back of his body, and sometimes we see scenes where the narrator is not there, so the movie's perspective cannot literally be that of a camera the character holds. The movie's camera sometimes is the narrator's camera and sometimes isn't; it is the narrator's camera insofar as his eye is his camera; we both are and are not the narrator himself, as Meimei both is and is not Moudan. So whereas *Vertigo* analyzes obsession from without, and with "objective" cinematography to match, *Suzhou River* responds to repetition compulsions from within, and the viewer is part of the story.

Here we can also see Lou Ye's divergence from the other most obvious and most often cited influence on *Suzhou River*: the handheld-camera style of Wong Kar-Wai's *Chungking Express*. Wong Kar-Wai's film emphasizes the relativism of our lives and love stories, and is told, as it were, from within, but an omniscient narrator tells it from within, or at least an omniscient filmmaker, so to speak, who moves freely between the different narrator-characters' interiorities. *Suzhou River* takes the subjectivity of *Chungking Express* one big step farther by locking us into a single subjectivity and keeping us there. This difference means much more than the similarities (if anything, Wong Kar-Wai's *Happy Together*, with its investigations into the possibilities and impossibilities of "starting over, from the beginning," is closer to *Suzhou River*'s concerns than *Chungking Express* is). The narrator of *Suzhou River*, like all of us, cannot simply read another's mind or see the world through their eyes for a moment, and so how does he love? If you don't want to love like Johnny Ferguson or Mardar, the movie seems to ask, then what do you do?

The narrator's relationship with Meimei has been on the rocks for a while, and he seems to spend an inordinate amount of time filming her rather than more simply being with her. He is, in short, the lover as teller of stories. The Suzhou River itself is a place of stories: in the movie's wonderful opening sequence, the voiceover tells us that the river carries "a century worth

Zhou Xun as Moudan, Meimei, mermaid

of stories" ("and rubbish, which makes it the filthiest river"). "If you watch it long enough, the river will show you everything," and the narrator *has* seen everything along the river—love, loneliness, suicide, two young lovers' bodies being pulled from the river—every possible plot. (All stories are love stories.) He travels along with the current and films these proto-narratives. Meanwhile, during the same sequence, the camera skitters around the river while sailing smoothly down to the sea, and stops to zoom in on different faces, interactions, and little scenes, each of which could, the shot suggests, generate a movie-length story of its own. Here the Hitchcock influence seems to be the panoply of apartments in *Rear Window*, but the Suzhou River moves, unlike *Rear Window*'s tableau; the river, like Mardar's motorcycle, is movement, flux, nonrepetition. You cannot step in the same river twice. Yet Mardar and Moudan do fall in the same river twice, and Mardar (later with Moudan) watches the same stories over and over again on video, and Mardar's motorcyle rides criss-cross the city only before he meets Moudan, and after he loses her; when they are together, they take the same route along the river over and over again.

Meimei wants the narrator's love for her to be permanent and fixated, as in Mardar and Moudan's world of repetition, immune from the narrative drive toward an ending. The "I" of *Suzhou River*, in contrast, resists repetition in favor of narrative—stories which come to an end and are followed by other stories. In the final sequence of the movie, he relinquishes Mardar-esque love and lets Meimei go, "because nothing lasts forever"; he lets this love story come to an end and waits "for the next story to start." And young Moudan, the figure of innocent, untainted love in *Suzhou River*, is in the narrator's situation too: when they lose the single person they love, they move on, he by ending the movie and she by jumping into the river, threatening to come back as a mermaid to torment Mardar. If her jump is a suicide attempt, it represents a refusal to move on, a rejection of both narrative and repetition. But we don't know Moudan's intentions, so she *does* come back as mermaid: half in the underwater world without love, half in the living world of another story. And that is just where the narrator ends up in the movie's haunting conclusion: on the Suzhou River, drunk, stranded at the end of one love story and waiting for the next to begin.

If this were its only theme or subject, *Suzhou River* would be impressive enough. But there are layers beneath these psychological layers, because the entire story of Mardar and Moudan is explicitly framed as just that, a *story*, invented by the narrator. When Meimei first tells the narrator about Mardar, the narrator dismisses Mardar's love—just as he also claimed not to believe in mermaids—by saying that it's "just a story. I could make one up too." The camera, with the most uncertain movements in the movie, reminiscent of but even more erratic than the camerawork in the opening sequence on the Suzhou River of stories, skips around the passers-by on a bridge over the river. The view has already been defined as the narrator's view out of his window. It picks up empty pavement, a fight in the opposite apartment (*Rear Window* again), a motorcycle courier, bicyclists, people on foot, a girl with long black hair, the courier again, empty pavement, the girl, settles on the motorcycle courier, and the voiceover says, "The motorcycle courier. Mardar." If the story were "real," the narrator could not see the years-ago Moudan and Mardar outside his present-day window; instead, these people have caught the narrator's eye and he has created around them a story set in the past. (There is the same dynamic in *The Usual Suspects*, where the roving camerawork in the interrogation room at the end of the movie conveys Kevin Spacey's roving eye, which has picked up whatever was at hand and woven it into a story. Camera movement spins the thread of story into existence, and generates for the viewer the *feel* of narrative.) Throughout the story of Mardar and Moudan, the narrator reminds us that he is its author, not merely its teller: "What else? Let me think"; "His past . . . could be . . ."; "Maybe Mardar's not simply a courier"; "What happens next? Well, . . ." He even cites sources: "I remember reading an article about it in the paper," which is then shown onscreen. Finally, when Mardar returns, years after Moudan has jumped in the river and when all his avenues for finding her again seem exhausted, the narrator admits, "Not much of a love story, but I don't know how to go on with it. Unless . . . Mardar can finish telling his story himself. . . ."

That is when Mardar meets Meimei, and the two stories begin to intertwine. But even in this second half, one could make the argument that all of the Mardar/Meimei encounters are invented and narrated, not "real." After all, how could a made-up character suddenly become real? Maybe the narrator is just continuing to tell his Mardar story. When Mardar first sees Meimei in her dressing room, the shot is identical to when the narrator first saw her there. The narrator likes to work from material he knows, or can see before him, like the motorcycle courier and the girl on the street outside his window. Most obviously, all of the parallels between Meimei and Moudan, from the mer-

The bridge outside the narrator's window, where stories are born.

maid costume to their identical appearance to the press-on tattoos of a rose on their left thighs, are explicable only as the products of a story (the narrator, who already knows Meimei, has invented Moudan to match). How else, "in reality," could the two women be so similar?

The two conversations between the ("real") narrator and (the "fictional") Mardar seem to refute this theory, but both conversations have a certain unreal quality—they are slightly out of focus, or opaque, as if shot through a pane of glass; most affectingly, Mardar looks directly into the camera, with an open expression on his face that is the exact opposite of his usual dour scowl. (In fact, people rarely look into the camera in *Suzhou River*—Moudan constantly looks at Mardar, while Mardar's gaze is off into space, or indrawn, or buried under the brooding visor of his black motorcycle helmet; even when the narrator is "shooting" Meimei, she looks past the camera at the implied filmer—except in the explicitly artificial sequences: the fisherman who sees a mermaid on the river; the karaoke singer; and Mardar with the narrator.) The second of these conversations between Mardar and the narrator is inexplicable on a "factual" level (Mardar promises to give Meimei back to the narrator if the narrator lets him go on looking for Moudan, but how could either of them possibly do these things?); it does make sense, however, as a character addressing his author. Give me a happy ending, Mardar says, and that will make Meimei love you again, either because the story will be happy, or because you'll stop telling it and will start paying attention to her again. After all, we never learn what Meimei and the narrator's fight is about—is it because she is falling for Mardar (as the movie implies on the surface), or just because she is tired of the narrator constantly filming her and daydreaming?

Even the circular frame of the movie is open to interpretation, once we go down this road. The first words of the movie—"If I left you, would you look for me? Like Mardar?" "Yes." "Forever?" "Yes." "Your whole life?" "Yes."—return at the end, with visuals of Meimei lying in bed and talking to the narrator (that is, talking past the camera). We assume that this dialogue happens chronologically last, and that everything in between has been the narrator's flashback. But the dialogue at the end appears in the context of the narrator saying that it was just "like old times" again; he "sat up all night watching old videos [he] had shot of her," and we see scenes we saw earlier, so perhaps the conversation is chronologically first and the repetition at the end is just another flashback.

When we start to take these possibilities into account, *Suzhou River* turns into a movie like *The Usual Suspects*, a movie about storytelling. It also becomes solipsistic, or at least a study in solipsism: the "I" is a

man trapped in his stories, whose stories become more real to him than the reality of the woman he loves. The fact that the narrator knows nothing of Meimei's past starts to seem more sinister, more indicative of the fact that he knows nothing of her present; we too know nothing about the "real" Meimei, because everything is filtered through the mind which controls the camera, and which therefore controls our access to everything we see and hear. All we "know" is that Keyser Soze is released from custody and disappears into the end of *The Usual Suspects,* and that *Suzhou River*'s narrator ends up alone.

This clever argument, however, which purports to be the real story, cannot be the real real story—and that is *Suzhou River*'s greatest strength. There is the *Vertigo* level of repetition and loss, although *Suzhou River* comes down on the more ambiguous side where narratives end but life remains open-ended. Then there is the underlying level, which is perfectly satisfying in *The Usual Suspects*—"Verbal" Kint's brilliant storytelling abilities foil the lame narrative style of the cops ("To a cop, the explanation is never that complicated . . ."), and Keyser Soze gets away—but to stop there would seem cheap in *Suzhou River*. The story Verbal tells in *The Usual Suspects* is just a crime caper, but love runs deeper.

In the end, no matter how much evidence there is to explain away the story of Mardar and Moudan, it refuses to be explained away. There are enough elements of the plot which are impossible, or far too implausible, to explain as the narrator's story, especially the scene when Meimei sees Mardar's and Moudan's bodies. (Death is always ground zero, almost perfectly resistant to storytelling's power.) At the other end of the spectrum from death, beauty is the culmination of storytelling's power: the visual beauty of the film as a whole, and especially the striking sequences whose sheer, exquisite audacity lift themselves out of the thread of the narrative, leave the realm of story, and become real. These sequences are the ones I listed above, in which characters—even the "fictional" Mardar in dialogue with his "author"—look into the camera to connect with *us*, the real figures unequivocally outside the narrator's frame. There is an additional shot where a character looks into the camera—a shot which is not, like the others, "unreal," but which instead is the movie's utmost portrayal of beauty: when Meimei is swimming in slow motion in her mermaid outfit toward Mardar and us. Beauty creates a connection across levels—between the "fictional" Mardar and the "real" Meimei, and between Meimei and us.

Finally, and most importantly, just as Moudan's innocence (and Zhou Xun's acting) radiate an authenticity and—in the strongest sense—reality, Meimei and Mardar have that aura: we *care* about them, and we cannot emotionally accept a theory that would submerge them into the mere imagination of a solipsistic "I." Love is the real real story, as always—our emotional investment in love stories, at least my emotional investment in love stories, simply outweighs epistemological considerations. *Suzhou River*'s true accomplishment is to do two synonymous things at once: to undercut its own intellectual paradoxes and force us to this conclusion, and to create a beautiful and moving film which speaks this truth for itself even if all the epistemological trickery goes unnoticed.

Of course, in the most literal, pedestrian sense, this talk of "reality" is just mystification, because Mardar and Meimei are "just" characters in a movie—mere products of a director's or screenwriter's or actor's fantasy, like the characters in *The Usual Suspects* and *Vertigo* and every straightforwardly realistic movie too. But our decision to go to the movies—to give ourselves over to a story—makes us all the more able to acknowledge a character's emotional reality (and a film's visual reality); in fact, we are all too willing to not make that effort for the "real" people in our lives, and instead explain *them* away with the stories we tell ourselves about them. "Suspension of disbelief" is far too tepid a phrase for what we do when faced with fictional art; we engage our powers of belief, activate our moral imagination.

And that is how love works too. "How could a made-up character suddenly become real?" is the question which Mardar's status as part of the narrator's fictional story makes us ask, but that question has an answer, in fact two answers. If this made-up character is in a really good story. And: love. (Love, Iris Murdoch once wrote, is the incredibly difficult process of coming to believe that another person is real.) *Suzhou River* is one of those rare works of art which not only thematize openness or open-endedness, but which are themselves open, opening out into the rest of the reader's or viewer's life. The "I" ends—"I" end—the movie having been touched by another life. I have seen it, half-submerged in the unknowable world of its own reality, and now it has left me, and maybe I don't even believe in mermaids, but here I am, alone for now, but ready.

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Book Reviews

Arthur Penn's Bonnie and Clyde

Edited by Lester D. Friedman. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. $52.95 cloth; $18.95 paper.

Once an explosion, *Bonnie and Clyde* is now a popgun. Maturity has exposed its ill-conceived comedy, its screenplay too reliant on pop-psych ready-mades, its collection of middling-to-bad performances. Far from being Arthur Penn's best work, its genre revision is less intense than *The Left-Handed Gun*'s, its character study not nearly so vivid as *The Miracle Worker*'s. *The Chase* has richer subtext, and even the barely watchable *Mickey One* is at least uncompromising. As radical as it once looked, *Bonnie and Clyde* saves its only real transgression for the final scene, and review reveals how little justification there is for such abstract violence climaxing an otherwise straightforward piece of gangster sentimentality.

Editor Lester D. Friedman's collection of contemporary essays is unwitting evidence to the film's lack of resiliency: those critics who make their points have nothing new to say, and those who have something new to say don't make their points. The first two essays are not critical but personal, coming from director Penn and co-scenarist David Newman. Penn, recounting his assumption of the project, certain aspects of its creation, and his reactions to others' reactions, emerges as a forthright and unpretentious memoirist. (This despite an extended run at Pauline Kael, the film's earliest and loudest champion, which is both reasonable in its points and defensive in its tone.) Newman, retrieving the jaded though breezy tone of the slick-magazine commentator he once was, gives a similarly entertaining and informative view from the inside, concentrating mainly on what he and writing partner Robert Benton did *not* consciously intend in the way of gay subtext and other latter-day symbol-sightings. (This has the unfortunate effect of casting a precusory cloud over the queer interpretation lodged by Friedman's final contributor, whom Newman chides for her overactive imagination.)

Essay three is hard history with a stiff dose of polemic. Diane Carson's "'It's Never the Way I Knew Them': Searching for Bonnie and Clyde" measures the gaping factual chasms separating the real Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker from their shadows on the screen. She details how since the 30s the pair have been lionized or demonized by virtually everyone—their families, the Texas Rangers who tracked them, the press—and the facts of their spree written and rewritten for expedient drama. Penn's film came only at the far end of a long process in which the historical record was thoroughly mangled in the maw of sensation; as Carson's researches show, the film is scarcely more nuanced, let alone observant of truth, than a contemporary report in the yellow pages of a Hearst paper.

Carson means to counteract Penn's film, and she does. Her anger at *Bonnie and Clyde*—"Why, then as now, are we so determined to turn common criminals into heroic, liberated Robin Hoods?" (60-1)—typifies the historian's eternal response to the smudges, evasions, and plain lies necessitated by the conversion of fact into art, and the point remains forever arguable. What doesn't is that history reimagined in a spirit of complexity and empathy is only enlarged, not diminished, when set next to the facts which it shadows. Carson arrays the facts, and *Bonnie and Clyde* comes out diminished.

Steven Alan Carr's "From 'Fucking Cops!' to 'Fucking Media!': *Bonnie and Clyde* for a Sixties America," provides a potted history of the changes in Hollywood and America that set the stage for *Bonnie and Clyde*, and identifies "the film's unique appeal to the knowing spectator," who is encouraged by its purposive parallels between 30s and 60s America to read the story "as more than just a literal narrative" (81-2). A lengthy collection of 1967 quotes from reviewers and viewers indicates how that unique appeal was, by Carr's lights, either correctly or incorrectly perceived. Finally there is a consideration of how *Bonnie and Clyde* spoke to the disaffiliated American youth audience, brought it forth as an active and important viewing bloc, and began its inevitable exploitation.

I've read Carr's essay three times and do not yet know what it is trying to do. Its title would suggest an arc between cinema violence in its 60s manifestation as social protest and its 90s utility as political football, but the essay itself has no such focus. Carr has not molded his copious research into a sharp, forward-moving apprehension of the film's importance as either a movie classic or a milestone of Hollywood demography. What remains is a scatter of facts and assertions without center, supportive of no theme, driving to no culmination.

Matthew Bernstein's purpose in "Model Criminals: Visual Style in *Bonnie and Clyde*" is to document "with the benefit of a close analysis" the film's "complex, hybrid visual style" (106). The emphasis is on editing and camera placement, and Penn's and editor Dede Allen's ability to achieve "stylistic variety" while maintaining "organic unity" (121). As a representative instance, Bernstein studies the opening scene, which shows Bonnie in her drab bedroom, looking caged and frustrated, her existential itch felt in suffocating camera angles and quick, nervous cutting. A later scene situates "Bonnie and Clyde in a hotel room when Clyde has failed to make love to Bonnie after his first killing": this shot is a long take, and "the duration of such shots could not contrast more with the jagged editing of that opening scene" (112). Thus maturity in the characters, callow impatience deepening into doubt and apprehension, is repeatedly indicated through editing.

But does this kind of formal skill constitute greatness, or is it the least we should expect from a well-made film? Is that bedroom montage a functional setting of mood or "one of the most daring and jarring opening sequences in American film history" (101)? Close reading is too close when the observer finds transport in every elementary brushstroke. For Bernstein, basic shifts in tone are evidence of innovative artistry, when in fact they signal nothing more portentous

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than Penn's command of techniques already long in use. Changes in cutting, variations in shots—since Eisenstein and Griffith, this has been how a story gets told, basic emotional tones sounded. Given their narrative functions, only a fool, or a genius, would think of shooting the two bedroom scenes any differently; Penn, being neither, merely gets the job done.

In "The Hemorrhaging of American Cinema," Stephen Prince traces the practice of screen violence from Penn's machine-gun finale to its current degraded status as empty spectacle. After a redundant expository passage on 60s turmoil vis-à-vis Hollywood, and a more informative discussion of clinical studies on the effects of screen violence, Prince gets to the meat of the matter: "The bloody montage that concludes *Bonnie and Clyde* was both a beginning and an end. . . . The radical gestures of Penn, Peckinpah, and other filmmakers of the late sixties have led to films of uninhibited sadomasochism . . . rage and nihilism. And there is no end in sight" (145-6). He spots the seed of this in *Bonnie and Clyde*'s death scene, which "lacks a sustained sense of the emotional and psychological components of Bonnie and Clyde's death agonies," and whose viewpoint "is entirely exterior and physical" (143). It is hard to gainsay a word of this. But Prince, probably our foremost film-oriented analyst of screen violence, is revisiting ground that is perhaps too familiar to him. Implicit in his essay is the conclusion that, outside of its violence, *Bonnie and Clyde* does not offer great reward, and that its reward of violence is hollow in every way but formally. Also prevalent is a tone of barely sustained interest in the ostensible topic: Prince cannot fully engage with a film which does not fully engage him, as have the works of Kurosawa and Peckinpah.

The last original essay is Liora Moriel's "Erasure and Taboo: A Queer Reading of *Bonnie and Clyde*," and despite a title from the generic aisle of the academic supermarket, it is trying to do something different. Moriel's contention is that *Bonnie and Clyde* started out with a queer subtext which, thanks largely to the commerce-minded Arthur Penn and the gay-nervous Warren Beatty, was almost but not completely obliterated. But because its traces remain on the screen, *Bonnie and Clyde* is revealed as a compromised work: "by denying the queer, Penn falls short of greatness, and his work remains, despite his aspirations, a well-crafted but disturbingly dishonest movie" (149).

We know from several sources that the sexual ambiguities of both Clyde and wheel man C.W. were an aspect of the film's original conception. But how pervasive do those ambiguities remain, whatever the reason for their excision? Except for one undeniable and self-evident example—Clyde's declaration of straightness is mocked when he thumps his head on a car door—the moments Moriel offers in support of her reading are either so fleeting or so broadly interpretable that they do not hit home. For instance, the scene in which Clyde snubs Bonnie and offers C.W. "a lick of his ice cream stick, surely an obvious sign of affection, if not lust": fear in a handful of dust, and lust in a scoop of Rocky Road? This evokes the high camp of Parker Tyler—who felt homoeroticism blazing in Michael Redgrave's eating of a cucumber sandwich—though without his self-mockery and delicious, capricious style. (Tyler, by the way, awaits acknowledgement as the true Big Daddy of queer studies. Vito Russo's *Celluloid Closet*, not Tyler's decade-older *Screening the Sexes*, is wrongly cited by Moriel as "the first book to examine homosexuality in film" [155].)

Part of the problem may be Moriel's expansive definition of queer as "anything that is not heterosexist or homophobic, as anything that challenges and interrogates 'straight' readings of texts" (153). Therefore Clyde's impotence, suggesting resistance to the hetero role, cues a queer reading—despite the fact that Clyde overcomes his "difficulty," and that in the film's terms this is a great victory. Moriel is probably correct in presuming that this substory is "unsatisfying to the average viewer today," but her reason why—"For current viewers . . . sexual performance is largely irrelevant" (168)—rings false. Audiences continue to be inordinately impressed by heroes who prove themselves in the sack; they may be less so when a movie like *Bonnie and Clyde* uses the impotence crisis as a substitute for actual themes. (When Clyde's semen becomes "sop to the audience," in the Kael phrase.) One relishes such contrarian analysis as Moriel attempts, the cleaving of a familiar work to tweeze out the subversive slugs existing in its crevices. But the slugs had better be there; again and again, Moriel's dissolve into suppositional quarks.

This collection ends by reprinting Bosley Crowther's famous *New York Times*' dismissal of *Bonnie and Clyde* as "a cheap piece of bald-faced slapstick comedy" (177), and Pauline Kael's invigorating but overblown *New Yorker* defense of a film which she ultimately rates as little more than "an entertaining movie with some feeling in it" (198). The best writing on *Bonnie and Clyde* is still right here, in Kael and even the dreaded Crowther—each is viscerally correct, each is passionate, whereas Friedman's collection finds the film-analyst pros outclassed by the amateurs. The book's strength resides in the filmmaker's anecdote and the historian's rectitude, and if one seeks fresh perspectives on *Bonnie and Clyde*, more will be found there than in the remaining contemplations of a sacred monster.

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Genre and Hollywood

By Steve Neale. New York: Routledge, 2000. $22.95.

The reports of the death of genre theory in film studies have been greatly exaggerated. Within the past 20 years a neo-genre theory has emerged which has shifted the locus of film genre theory from its origins in literary studies toward a more independently cinematic orientation. In 1984, Alan Williams' article "Is a Radical Genre Criticism Possible?" questioned not only the reliance of film genre theory on lit-

erary studies but even the very term "genre" itself. Williams wrote, "Perhaps the biggest problem with genre theory or criticism in the field of cinema is the word *genre*. Borrowed, as a critical tool, from literary studies . . . the applicability of 'genre' as a concept in film studies raises some fairly tough questions." Written primarily as a critique of Thomas Schatz's book *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (1981), Williams' essay pinpointed the major problem of film genre theory as being the "tendency to essentialize its object." This was primarily accomplished through the canonization of a handful of films and the use of those films as a template for further genre study. Numerous films within particular genres were either not acknowledged or given a marginalized status as cinematic aberrations. The result was a film genre theory which tended to be ahistorical and text-driven. Williams suggested two directions that future film genre theory could develop: 1) by constructing a new theory and methodology, or 2) by returning to film history to try and produce individual genre studies with genuine integrity.

Since then, a number of film scholars have attempted to establish an independent scholarly approach to film genre that is based on empirical research and grounded in film history. Foremost among them are Rick Altman and Steve Neale. Coincidentally, both scholars have recently published books which expand on previously written work in genre theory. Rick Altman's *Film/Genre* (1999) (reviewed in *FQ* vol. 53, no. 4) further develops ideas and concepts from his seminal 1986 essay "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre" and *The American Film Musical* (1987). Steve Neale's *Genre and Hollywood* is, likewise, an extension of his short work *Genre* (1980) and his essay "Questions of Genre" (1990). Both authors attest to the fact that a revival is in progress in film genre scholarship which acknowledges the importance of historical research and the symbiotic relationship between film production, history, and theory.

Neale's purpose in *Genre and Hollywood* is "to review existing work and to present new ideas and new findings." The author argues for a reassessment of film genre theory through detailed empirical analysis and comprehensive industrial and historical research. This represents the major division between previous genre studies based on literary theory and neo-genre theory. It is not simply text-specific, by means of cataloging, ad infinitum, a list of relevant characteristics and canonizing certain films at the expense of others. Rather, Neale, Altman, and others argue that film genre is much more complex and multifaceted than previously suggested. As Steve Neale states in his introduction, "The point is made that aesthetic and socio-cultural theories alike tend to underplay the elements of discontinuity, diversity and difference in Hollywood's output, to substitute a number of presumptions and generalizations for detailed empirical research, and therefore in effect if not in intention to isolate that output from the historical and industrial conditions and forces that underpin it." *Genre and Hollywood* seeks to redress the focus of film genre theory by both surveying the existing critical discourse on the subject and emphasizing areas for further study.

The author organizes the book into three major divisions. In Part One, "Genre: Definitions and Concepts," Neale discusses the numerous literary definitions of genre and briefly examines several theoretical concepts. One of the important points emphasized in this section is that genre is multidimensional and is not simply restricted to films. Neale claims that genres "consist also of specific systems of expectations and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process." Central to this idea is the concept of "inter-textual relay," a term referring to the institutionalized discourse through which films are marketed. The inter-textual relay includes advertising copy, posters, stills, trailers, marquee displays, cinemas, cinema programming, and cinema specialization. It is also transgeneric: institutional relays can cross over from other media such as theater, publishing, radio, and television in generating genre expectations. Neale illustrates this concept by briefly discussing the early history of the Western, which parallels the emergence of a "synthetic" West in popular literature and entertainment.

The second section of Neale's book is devoted to a detailed survey and critical assessment of existing writings on individual genres. The author identifies 14 major genres: action-adventure, biopics, comedy, detective films, gangster films, suspense thrillers, epics and spectacles, horror, science fiction, musicals, social problem films, teenpics, war films, and Westerns. Neale's expressed purpose here is to "summarize writing and research in the field as well as to pinpoint continuing issues, problems and gaps." In writing about the gangster film, for instance, the author discusses the weaknesses of one of the seminal essays on the genre, "The Gangster As Tragic Hero," by Robert Warshow. In so doing, he effectively reiterates the limitations of previous genre theory—its reliance on literary models and its tendency toward generalization. Warshow's essay is highly selective, mentioning only three films, *Little Caesar, Scarface,* and *Kiss of Death,* in positing the gangster film as a "modern equivalent of tragedy." There is no mention of silent gangster films or the countless films that arose from the early 30s production cycle. Neale then proceeds to survey further critical literature on the genre, noting similar weaknesses, primarily the absences of historical cycles and trends in the pursuit of a teleological construct of the genre. According to Neale, "canons of critical preference, rather than those of empirical or historical enquiry, have often resulted in uneven degrees of attention, discussion and research."

Following this extensive survey of major genres, the author turns his attention to two problematic topics in genre study: film noir and melodrama. In a most insightful analyses of film noir, Neale again stresses the ineffectiveness of any genre theory and criticism that is not empirically grounded. Claiming that film noir "is in essence a critical category," Neale further states that, "its corpus can only be established by means of critical observation and analysis;

its constituents and contours cannot be verified by reference to contemporary studio documents, discussions or reviews, or to any other contemporary intertextual source." Rather than seeing the film noir canon as the result of a single generic production trend, Neale argues that the films should be viewed within their "immediate cyclic and generic contexts." John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), for instance, should be seen as a hard-boiled detective film (which was how it was advertised and marketed at the time of its release), instead of as a primary example of film noir.

Neale treats the term "melodrama" in much the same way. Film studies' utilization of the term is generally limited to the films of Douglas Sirk, Nicholas Ray, and others who produced a number of films in the 1950s revolving around domestic/family problems and concerns. *Written on the Wind, Rebel Without a Cause, Magnificent Obsession,* and *Imitation of Life* are a few of the key films referred to by scholars such as Thomas Elsaesser and others. Neale argues that the term melodrama was used to describe a vast array of films that usually contained crime, guns, violence, women in peril, as well as action, tension, and suspense—in other words, film noir.

The third section of *Genre and Hollywood* is devoted to the generic composition of Hollywood itself and thereby to an analysis of the nature and status of films as industrial commodities. Neale's major argument is that industrial concepts of genre are vastly different than theoretical ones. "The strategies of the industry and its companies have always been plural and mixed, marked by an array of categories, formulas and combinations that overlap with, but often exceed, the categories that genre critics and theorists have tended to acknowledge hitherto." The author examines the post-studio era concept of the New Hollywood, noting many similarities to 1930s classical Hollywood cinema. These similarities include star vehicles, cycles, long-term trends, hybridity, and blockbusters. Neale in this section reinforces his claim that most film genre theorists and critics have "used the concept of genre as a way of avoiding detailed study of anything other than selective samples of Hollywood's art."

The well-written and well-researched *Genre and Hollywood* is an important contribution to film genre studies in both its survey of critical literature and its subsequent questioning of that literature. A particularly valuable aspect of the book is the extensive bibliography to which Neale constantly refers throughout his text. But perhaps its most important contribution is that this work, as well as Rick Altman's *Film/Genre,* has attempted to answer Alan Williams' question, "Is a Radical Genre Criticism Possible?" The answer is a resounding "Yes," if, as Neale concludes, genre criticism is "characterized by painstaking industrial, socio-cultural and historical research, by a thorough viewing of more than a handful of canonic films, and by the willingness to question and abandon orthodox views."

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Hitchcock at Work

By Bill Krohn. London: Phaidon Press, 2000. $59.95.

This handsome, well-illustrated coffee-table book initially appears superfluous. After all, have not many studies already appeared dealing with the master of suspense, making any new discoveries impossible? However, this meticulously documented study, which originated from a 1982 roundtable discussion with many of Hitchcock's collaborators, reveals the differences between the legend and the actual person. Krohn, with his extensive archive research and interviews, discovered a different Hitchcock from the control freak bored with directing after intensive preproduction planning—a myth promulgated by the director himself and exaggerated by many critics. Although the director emphasized preparation, "chaos was a frequent collaborator in his productions, one whom he seemed at times to invite. Perhaps that tension is part of what makes his films endlessly fascinating" (10).

Krohn's prologue outlines the various myths concerning Hitchcock's techniques: the script and storyboard containing every cinematic innovation; Hitchcock's supposed practice of editing everything in the camera; his refusal to improvise on the set; and the attempt to create a stylized vision of the world on a sound stage. He finds that all these myths lack evidence. For example, the precise nature of the cinematic all-in-one kissing scene in *Notorious* finds no counterpoint in the script. And even if camera directions existed in certain screenplays, Hitchcock often ignored them on set: storyboards were never a monolithic device for the entire film. As Krohn states, they "are also a way for the individuals and departments involved in creating a complex action sequence . . . to communicate among themselves. That doesn't mean, however, that they are literally blueprints for the shots to be taken" (12). According to editor Rudy Fehr, Hitchcock did film in a manner that left his editor various choices. Finally, although Hitchcock preferred working on a set, he also emphasized the importance of reproducing reality via research and location shooting. Krohn's dedicated empirical research concerning the actual production practices excavates key factual evidence that contradicts the popular (and inaccurate) legend concerning the director's working methods.

The author did much of his research in Hollywood archives; Hitchcock's British films do not benefit from the same meticulous treatment as the American ones. (However, the reader may supplement this deficiency by consulting Charles Barr's recent book, *English Hitchcock*.) *Hitchcock at Work* begins with furnishing interesting information from *Rebecca* (1940) onwards. Despite Selznick's control, Hitchcock managed to circumvent the producer by encouraging Laurence Olivier to follow Daphne Du Maurier's treatment of the hero as a boor and suggesting Mrs. Danvers' lesbian inclinations. *Saboteur* (1942) was very much an experimental film in terms of the director's fascination with Hol-

lywood technological approaches and his first meeting with production designer Robert Boyle. Using various examples of storyboards and stills (not all of which correspond with final scenes), Krohn shows that *Saboteur* also contains the director's only "cinematic parody" (50) in his films during the shoot-out in Radio City.

The section on *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) is exemplary in revealing the nature of "Hitchcock realism." The director's four-week location shooting in Santa Rosa during late summer 1942 not only anticipated Hollywood postwar practices in *The Naked City* (1948) and *On The Town* (1949), but also merged German Expressionist techniques with implicit warnings about "the danger of a resurgence of fascism inside America's borders" (71). Krohn also reveals many significant details concerning the making of *Notorious* (1946), *Rear Window* (1954), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1955), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963). The section on *Notorious* is the book's key achievement, with its meticulous documentation of archival evidence. It also reveals the political critiques Hitchcock and scenarist Ben Hecht implicitly made against the U.S. postwar rehabilitation of companies with connections to the Nazi era. Krohn astutely comments that although *Notorious* can be read as a Freudian fairytale, both director and scenarist wished "to remind us that we live in an era when one has to take sides, even in a fairytale" (103).

The remainder of this book contains important evidence, often rebutting the spurious interpretations of later critics such as Donald Spoto as well as contradicting the assertions of collaborators such as John Michael Hayes and Saul Bass, as to who actually did what on a particular film. It also contains significant insights. As a "failed exorcism" influenced by Gnostic tendencies, *Vertigo* "shows the world to be an illusion and portrays metempsychosis as an enigma which affords us glimpses of what lies behind the veil of life and death" (194). Alternatively, Krohn shows that *North by Northwest* forms a realistic nightmare counterpointing the previous films by reuniting the lovers rather than separating them by death. *The Birds* was not only a radical technical experiment for its time but one reworking the family antagonism contained in Hitchcock's earlier silent, *Easy Virtue* (1927). Finally, after defining *Family Plot* (1976) as an "exhilarating experiment in *mise-en-scène* from beginning to end," Krohn supplies an epilogue containing material on the director's cherished project—which he never filmed: J.M. Barrie's *Mary Rose,* which would have concluded a trilogy begun with *The Birds* and *Marnie*.

Hitchcock at Work is a major contribution to scholarship. Based upon reliable evidence and documentation, Krohn's classic study will be both an essential work for future scholarly studies and an indispensable reference book for any classes on the director which aim at a more serious approach to his work.

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A New Pot of Gold

Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980–1989

By Stephen Prince. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000. $112.50 cloth; $27.50 paper (forthcoming from University of California Press).

It is fitting that the last volume of Scribners' groundbreaking ten-volume history of the American cinema be Stephen Prince's *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989.* Beyond the specific qualities of this fine volume, it bookends wonderfully with the very first book in the series, Charles Musser's *The Emergence of Cinema.* There, Musser treated American film in its earliest days as one visual practice among many. The evolution of cinema into a unique art and industry had to be situated within the broader history of screen practices in which film interacted with other visual media. Cinema emerged into its own specificity only as the result of a gradual, complicated process. In complementary fashion, Stephen Prince brings the history to a close by examining how cinema's hard-won and seemingly irreducible identity disappears in a new age of electronic visuality and media synergy. In Prince's account, cinema once again becomes only one screen practice among many.

In particular, Prince provides a detailed history of how the business of film production mutated in the 1980s to make theatrical exhibition of narrative film only one of the many ways in which such narratives and images could be sold to a public. In his account, this is the great age of large-scale corporations setting out to become full-service entertainment providers in which non-entertainment subsidiaries are jettisoned and the need to extend film into ancillary markets (video, cable, and so on) becomes top industrial strategy. While Prince does deal with the auteurs of the decade, overall he tends to see creativity as driven primarily by marketing decisions. This is, then, also the great age of agents, managers, accountants, lawyers, and so on, all seeking to understand film as primarily a commodity that circulates in multiple fashions and gains additional value in new venues. To Musser's emphasis on screen practices as the field out of which cinema emerges there now ironically corresponds an understanding of film as, to use the vocabulary of studio executives quoted by Prince, "software." It is important, then, that the main title of Prince's book refer to monetary reward since the 1980s; as he trenchantly shows, new configurations of the moving image enabled the discovery of new markets, new revenues, new investments. The political economy behind the production and distribution of moving images is the key object of Prince's analysis and determines the sort of analysis to which he gives priority. To take just one example, in the second chapter, "Merger Mania," Prince provides a history of film companies—but with a concentration on their business decisions. In particular, in a fascinating

corrective to our tendency to understand current company evolution as driven by conglomeration, Prince notes that the 1980s were also quite centrally a moment of industry de-acquisition as entertainment companies jettisoned subsidiaries and branches that could form no effective synergy with the overall goal to provide marketable entertainment.

The concern to understand political economy as determinant of the impact of American film has its corollary in the structure of Prince's book. The first chapters examine business operations, concentrating on acquisition and de-acquisition and the cultivation of ancillary markets. This emphasis on the industry and its strategies for optimizing control and profit feeds naturally into a subsequent chapter, commissioned for the volume from Justin Wyatt, on the complicated fate of independent companies and mini-majors, all of whom are shown to have destinies influenced by, if not dependent on, the power of the big entertainment conglomerates. And from these chapters on the overall business tactics of the industry there is a logical transition to Prince's next chapter, on the key business players and their new role in the landscape of popular visual media.

This is not to say that the priority of political economy leads Prince to assume that the nature of the product—the films themselves—is an negligible issue. He does indeed give attention to the processes of artistic creativity in film production, and he also provides a detailed discussion of key generic trends. The first discussion is encapsulated in a chapter on "The Filmmakers," whom Prince nicely divides between "Below the Line" talent (cinematographers, production designers, editors, music scorers) and "Above the Line" talent. This latter category concentrates on film directors and some producers, and Prince productively divides his analysis between "Hit-Makers" (for example, Spielberg, Lucas, Simpson and Bruckheimer, Peters and Guber, etc.); "Embattled Auteurs" (the struggling survivors of the transition from Old to New Hollywood such as Altman, Bogdanovich, Coppola, and so on); "Newcomers" (a category which ranges from eccentrics like Tim Burton to the concentrated influx of women filmmakers, such as Penny Marshall or Penelope Spheeris, into feature filmmaking); "Working Directors" (figures such as Woody Allen, Clint Eastwood, or Sidney Lumet); and "Independents and Outsiders" (including Jim Jarmusch, David Lynch, and the Coen brothers).

Interestingly, while Prince's division of above-the-line talent into diverse categories might seem to echo Andrew Sarris's (in)famous classification of auteurs in his influential *American Cinema: Directors and Directions*, the differences between the two typologies is striking. For Sarris, there is little need to pay attention to the economics of the industry except as a shadowy pressure that the great auteurs transcend, while for Prince, as is shown both by the very mixture of producers and directors and by the decision to lead off with "Hit-Makers," creative expression is never inextricable from industry operations. On the one hand, as his discussion of the embattled figures shows, the New Hollywood leaves behind endless victims, those who are granted no way to find a fit between personal vision and industry necessity. On the other hand, the New Hollywood can easily find a place for creativity when this leads to the sort of fresh product that creates new demand. In fact, as Prince shows throughout his volume, the 1980s saw both a synergistic concentration of entertainment industries and a dispersive fragmentation of audiences along lines of gender, race, class, taste, and so on. But the big companies met the challenge of this dispersion with dispersed tactics of their own: the acquisition of independent producers and distributors so as to gain their appeal to niche audiences; the marketing of certain films to several targets at the same time (for example, *Flashdance*, promoted diversely as a film for men and for women); the cultivation of creative talent that seemed to speak to particular groups of viewers (for example, big studio courting of Spike Lee), and so on. The analysis of political economy reveals that there is no necessary and inevitable conflict between industry operation and creative fashioning or even auteurist personalization of the salable commodity.

Indeed, in his chapter on "Genres and Production Cycles," Prince employs political economy as one key way to examine the creative range of filmic practices in the decade. Intriguingly, this approach leads him to downplay the standard understanding of American cinema in the 1980s as a Reaganite cinema geared to highly ideological works of imperial conquest, a return to family values, remasculinization of feminized or fallen men, regression to childlike innocence, and other such themes. To be sure, Prince does find these themes in many films of the period, but he argues that there is a diversity of filmic practices in the period that can in no way be reduced to simple and univocal ideological apology. Thus, in a nice little discussion, Prince examines a mini-cycle of Hollywood films about Latin-American politics (including *Salvador*, *Under Fire*, and *Missing*), and notes that most of these works adopt a very critical attitude toward American influence on the crimes of the various dictatorships. (At the same time, though, Prince observes that many of the films also end up condemning leftist movements that they see as caught up in the same primitive cycles of violence.)

But Prince's goal in pinpointing an ideologically critical cycle of films is not to suggest that Hollywood breeds its own subversion. On the contrary, understanding Hollywood as a political economy leads to a revision of the very argument that would find the effects of films to lie in their ideology, whether progressive or reactionary. The bottom line is the market, and Hollywood demonstrates a resilient ability to incorporate all sorts of films, irrespective of their ideological persuasion, as long as they perform profitably. (In fact, Prince notes that the Latin-American cycle died out, but this demise seems more accountable in terms of poor performance of the films than of any sort of perceived ideological danger on the part of Hollywood honchos.) In disavowing a single Hollywood ideology, it should be noted, Prince is not disavowing a political impact for the Hollywood industry. Quite the contrary, he is merely displacing it from an impact that comes from ideological content to one that derives from economics: the bottom line is consumers

buying into a system of commodification. And the 1980s are particularly important for this emphasis on box office, as the increased concern for synergy and ancillary markets that Prince so nicely outlines in rich detail throughout the volume means that there are endless new ways for images to be marketed and new revenue streams generated from them. As a last chapter authored by Prince on censorship and rating code issues demonstrates, economic concern is not indifferent to questions of content: the 1980s were a period in which the morality of mainstream films was endlessly debated, and such debates could lead to strong financial decisions (for example, studios might remove films from distribution or push for those where controversy might seem to augur higher box office). Ironically, against the image of a singular ideological purport to Hollywood films, the morality battles sometimes involved conservative groups targeting certain films as not ideologically mainstream enough. At the very least, Prince's book pushes us to reconceptualize the interactions of economics and ideology.

Intriguingly, and intentionally or not, *A New Pot of Gold*'s emphasis on the economic bottom line manifests itself also in the volume's final two chapters, which are commissioned pieces, one by Carl Plantinga on 1980s documentary film and one by Scott MacDonald on experimental cinema in the same period. Thus, Plantinga begins his discussion with an account of the funding possibilities (and impossibilities) for documentary filmmaking, while MacDonald likewise commences with remarks on the fragile economic infrastructure for experimental filmmaking and for its systems of support (such as journals, film societies, and filmmaker cooperatives). Both chapters then proceed to richly detailed analyses of individual filmmakers and specific trends (revealingly, Plantinga notes the presence of a subgenre of documentaries that are critical of U.S. policy in Latin America, thus reiterating Prince's similar discussion of the fictional subgenre of films on the subject). But these authors' accounts of documentary and experimental film creativity and innovation are framed within the strong reminder that aesthetic and thematic innovation is always bounded by issues of economic support and access.

At one point, MacDonald chronicles how one independent filmmaker, Anne Charlotte Robertson, devoted much of the 1980s to developing an experimental aesthetic specifically enabled by the particular mode of production of Super 8 filmmaking. But he then goes on to end the discussion of Robertson on a downbeat note: "Having fought both her own demons and the limited opportunities for small-gauge exhibition, however, the 1990s find Robertson facing a new, poignant reality: just as her films are becoming more widely recognized, Kodak has announced that the availability of Super 8 film is coming to an end" (439). MacDonald's lament here echoes much of the argument of *A New Pot of Gold*. Film is not just a commodity like all others but involves artistry and invention, and can even turn to systems of production, distribution, and exhibition that set themselves outside the mainstream norms. But it is still a commodity, its technologies determined by financial decision, its visibility determined by the market. *A New Pot of Gold* is both a fitting and saddening conclusion to the history that the History of the American Cinema project has been telling. It evokes and invokes the richness of filmmaking practices—both mainstream and alternative—even as it gives a harsh and perhaps tragic image of a cultural form, the cinema, losing its specificity and even identity in the vast synergistic networks of control at the end of the twentieth century.

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The Power of Film Propaganda

Myth or Reality

By Nicholas Reeves. London: Cassell, 1999. $29.95.

We all know the films because we grew up with them: *The Battleship Potemkin, Triumph of the Will, Listen to Britain, Fires Were Started, Rome: Open City, Ossessione*. Taken together, they represent some of the greatest achievements of world cinema. At film school we dissected Eisenstein's montage, Riefenstahl's theatrics, Jennings' use of drama documentary, and Visconti's social realism. In short, we asked every single question except possibly the most important ones: Did these films achieve their underlying objectives? Did they succeed in altering attitudes and opinions? Yes, they may be fine as art, but did they work as propaganda?

Most of us automatically assumed they did, for hadn't we imbibed Lenin and Lunacharsky's easy sayings on the power and ability of film to reach out to the masses. And some of the brighter scholars even quoted Trotsky's dictum, "This weapon [film] which cries out to be used, is the best instrument for propaganda." Lenin, Lunacharsky, Trotsky, and Goebbels were not alone in their beliefs. In the years before television, governments, revolutionary intellectuals, party politicians, and individual filmmakers all believed that film offered a uniquely effective means of manipulating the ideology of the masses. *Potemkin, Triumph of the Will,* and the other films cited above were all products of this assumption. So much for accepted gospel. In his riveting *The Power of Film Propaganda,* Nicholas Reeves argues, however, that this basic assumption, if not fatally flawed, at least needs drastic reexamination.

Drawing on recent historical scholarship, Reeves examines five different case studies of Russian, German, Italian, and British propaganda films to explore four different questions: Why were the films made? Under what conditions? Did they reach their target audiences? Did they have the impact on the audiences that the propagandists expected? The answers are, in all cases, fascinating—and in a few cases quite startling.

Take Russia. Reeves gives a wonderful picture of the difficulties and policies involved in the creation of the Soviet film industry after the First World War. He also provides a very good analysis of Soviet ideology and attitude to film, the creation of the agit-prop trains, and the birth pangs of *Potemkin*. So far all is familiar. Then come the shocks. The films totally failed to reach the intended audience of illiterate millions. If and when they *were* shown, in a few scattered villages and towns, they were seen as incomprehensible, and in any case could in no way match the popularity of the Hollywood imports. But while the films may have bombed in Białystok, their overwhelming reception in the West created an enduring myth regarding the power of film as a medium of propaganda.

Joseph Goebbels, Nazi minister of propaganda after 1933, certainly believed in the myth, and spared no effort in linking the German film industry to his aims. In this he was tremendously successful. Costs were kept down. The required number of pictures were produced. Furthermore, and in contrast to the Soviet situation, the important fiction and factual films that were supervised by Goebbels and carried the burden of the propaganda message actually reached a mass audience that grew constantly in the Nazi years. But how far did the films transform the attitudes and ideology of the masses?

As Reeves tells it, the propaganda films aimed at winning support for euthanasia action encountered significant opposition. Propaganda films made to counter the growing pessimism about the outcome of the war were even less successful. And even the achievements of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will,* discussed at length in one of the most interesting sections of the book, are open to question. What Reeves makes clear is that Goebbels' apparent dislike of the film was just part of Riefenstahl's campaign to rehabilitate her reputation. Goebbels loved the film and praised it in public for its "steel-like conviction and passionate artistry." In the short term, it gave him what he wanted. It reaffirmed unity in the wake of the Roehm purge; it delivered a powerful portrait of the new Nazi nation; and it offered a dynamic presentation of the all-powerful Fuehrer. Yet how far was it responsible for creating "the Hitler myth"?

Triumph of the Will was released on May 1, 1935, and was very widely seen in the following months. Theoretically that is when its potential impact should have been the largest, and yet, in that very period, there was a marked *decline* in Hitler's popularity. The Nuremberg anti-Jewish laws were one source of unease. Mounting economic problems were an even more important source of dissatisfaction, much of which now focused on Hitler. The crisis was brief, and when German troops marched into the Rhineland, Hitler's popularity again soared. But what this all demonstrates is the marginal role played by *Triumph of the Will* in shaping attitudes to Hitler. And for all the publicity, notoriety, and shock surrounding *The Eternal Jew,* the impact of this vicious 1940s film also seems to have been minor.

The fanatical anti-Semitism central to Nazi ideology had excluded Jews from the film industry, but the Nazis only embarked on the production of mainstream anti-Semitic films in 1939. Reeves goes into some depth in explaining why this was. The only thing he omits to mention is that the immediate reason for the change can probably be attributed to Hitler's January 1939 Reichstag speech, in which world Jewry was threatened with annihilation if war broke out. *Robert and Bertram* and *Linen from Ireland,* made in 1939, were mild anti-Jewish comedies. *The Rothschilds, Jew Suss,* and *The Eternal Jew,* all made in the following year, all backed by Goebbels, were of a different ilk: they were powerfully and disgustingly anti-Semitic. Did they work as propaganda?

Jew Suss was tremendously successful at the box office, but Reeves argues that the film, full of major stars, sex, and violence, was possibly popular not because of its anti-Semitism but in spite of it. Here I am not totally convinced. But what about *The Eternal Jew*? Fritz Hippler's film, closely supervised by Goebbels, used both archive footage and footage shot in the ghettoes of Poland. Its object was to portray the Jew as diseased, depraved, criminal, and the source of most of the evil in the world. For years, discussions of *The Eternal Jew* started from the assumption that the film was totally successful in its aims. Recent scholarship reaches a different conclusion. While the film's initial promotion provoked interest, and it was liked by the SS, the mass audience was deeply alienated by it and gave the film a wide berth. Reeves argues that this unequivocal rejection of the film suggests that the mass of the German people had not been persuaded to accept Goebbels' ideology. I think Reeves is wrong. According to historian Saul Friedlander, by 1939, anti-Semitism had become very widely accepted in Germany.[1] But even so, the Germans may have found Hippler's grotesque exaggerations and blatant lies just too much to swallow. *Jew Suss* was entertainment. *The Eternal Jew* was just boring rubbish.

Reeves argues that there can be little doubt that the propaganda films produced in Britain during WWII—in contrast to the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany—did achieve a great deal of success. Documentaries like *Listen to Britain* and *London Can Take It* and features like *Fires Were Started* and *In Which We Serve* seemed to meet the directives of the Government Film Division. Not only did they reach their target audiences, but the audiences seemed to accept the messages that the propagandists had set out to communicate. The only important exception was in the area of the newsreel, which, ironically, had been considered by the Ministry of Information, the arbiter of film policy, as the most important weapon in its film armory.

Success did not come easily, particularly after the WWI failures, which Reeves outlines at the beginning of his book. The men working in secret at the Ministry of Information misperceived the nature of the war, and they failed to see any role for Grierson's documentary film graduates. In some wonderfully clear and absorbing writing, Reeves then takes us through the changes in England under Churchill, the growing nature of a people's war, and the ultimate successes of men like Humphrey Jennings, Stewart McAllister, and

Harry Watts in forging a new kind of film. At the same time, he shows how a new documentary realism also enhanced and enthused a rather creaking feature industry. But again one has to ask why these films succeeded when those of their German and Soviet counterparts failed. The answer goes to the heart of film propaganda.

First, the films must reach an audience. This the Soviet films failed to do. But even when the films meet the viewers, as in Germany, there must be more. Britain's wartime films presented a view of her past and present that was both understood and accepted by the majority of the cinema audience. Films like *Listen to Britain* or *Target for Tonight* confirmed and *reinforced* an existing set of attitudes, self-perceptions, and ideas. By contrast, films that set out to radically *change* ideas and attitudes were the most unsuccessful.

Most of Reeves' book is devoted to war and political propaganda, but he saves a few pages for a sad look at the messages and work of Italian neorealism. With the new cinema of realism, postwar directors like Rossellini, de Sica, and Visconti aimed to transform the attitude and aspirations of the Italian people. They failed, and after analyzing why, Reeves writes, "Not only did they fail to transform Italian cinema, . . . but only a very few of their films ever reached their target audience." Yet as Reeves sets out very clearly, and as is apparent to all of us, though the Italian films failed in their propaganda aims, many of them, such as *Bicycle Thieves,* were cinematic masterpieces that will endure for generations. And that in fact is one of the striking things about the history of the genre. Faced with a propaganda directive, filmmakers from Eisenstein to Riefenstahl and Visconti and from Shub and Vertov to Jennings and McAllister responded with an imagination and creativity that changed the course of film history.

Because the book presents so many facts, figures, and engrossing stories, it takes time to absorb its central message, but by the end it is clear. During the last century many political leaders assumed that the new media presented them with enormously powerful tools to manipulate and control both ideology and the people they governed. In practice that power proved illusory. The myth of the power of film propaganda was more powerful than the propaganda itself. Whether that will stay true in the current century is another question.

I also realized after a while that Reeves is implicitly raising other questions which few of us are willing to face up to. Why do we make documentaries and what do we hope to achieve by them? The recent trend in documentary has been to try and make films that don't merely inform but that, like Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied,* also try to change attitudes and opinions. But are we achieving anything? Are the audiences getting our messages? Are the films doing what we want them to do? We rarely ask these questions, but Reeves shows it is probably time we did.

Like all good books—and in this case a brilliant book—*The Power of Film Propaganda* leaves us wanting more. For example, I would have lapped up a chapter on the American war propaganda film, the findings of the Payne Fund studies, and the successes or otherwise of *Memphis Belle* and Capra's *Why We Fight* series. But maybe that's in the future. Meanwhile, Reeves has given us one of the most important books on cinema to have been written in the last decade.

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Note

1. Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995).

Book Notes

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Allon, Yoram, Del Cullen, and Hannah Patterson, eds. *The Wallflower Critical Guide to Contemporary North American Directors*. London: Wallflower Press, 2000. Distributed in the U.S. by Columbia University Press. This is the first comprehensive critical dictionary of American cinema in quite some time, and although the task it undertakes is immense, it is, on the whole, a remarkably successful effort. As such, the book is a worthy successor to Andrew Sarris's *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968,* which summed up, albeit with a great deal of personal opinion, the American cinematic landscape in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Many of the contributors are associated with the British cinema journal *Sight and Sound,* which makes for an interesting critical perspective. For the most part, American film critics have failed to consider newer Hollywood films or directors seriously, and the studios themselves have made a mockery of the critical process by going so far as to "invent" fictitious reviewers to blurb their latest offerings, and coercing their employees into impersonating satisfied, "average" cinemagoers in television advertisements.

In this atmosphere of self-congratulatory logrolling, *The Wallflower Critical Guide to Contemporary North American Directors* is a breath of fresh and relatively unbiased air. It is not too much to say that this volume reconfigures and transforms the landscape of contemporary cinema criticism. The range of directors considered is impressive: Christopher Guest, Sidney Furie, Blake Edwards, Clint Eastwood, Atom Egoyan, Tom Hanks, Ulu Grosbard, Edward Norton, Nora Ephron, and Alison Anders all get detailed entries, with a career summary, discussion of key films, and a complete list of their credits. Even rapper/director Ice Cube gets a mention.

The critics in the volume include Peter Lehman, Deborah Jermyn, Hannah Ransley, William Luhr and many others; there are more than 60 contributors in all, giving the volume a multiplicity of critical voices.

These critical opinions are often unsparing. Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* is derided for its tendency toward "schmaltz and jingoism," while James Cameron's *Titanic* is dismissed as "ultimately hollow," and Warren Beatty's work in *Bulworth* is found to be "embarrassing in the extreme." Doug Liman, Richard Linklater, and John McNaughton, in contrast, are given much more favorable notices, but when a once promising director such as Jocelyn Moorhouse strays from the intensity of a personal film like *Proof* into the dreary complacency of *How To Make an American Quilt,* she is brought up sharply. My only caveat is that the volume focuses almost entirely on Hollywood narrative films; Canadian cinema is touched on only tangentially, so the title of the volume seems a bit misleading.

Nevertheless, all of the essays are meticulously written and edited, and there are, rather amazingly, no real factual errors in the volume, which is impressive, given the fact that it covers the complete careers and filmographies of over 500 filmmakers, is fully indexed, and at 535 tightly packed pages, stunningly comprehensive. At a time when reviews in newspapers and magazines seem designed to promote rather than examine films, this is a book that should be welcomed by academics and laypersons alike. Updates of the volume are promised every two years, with new directors added.

Wheeler Winston Dixon

Hill, John, and Pamela Church Gibson, eds. *World Cinema: Critical Approaches*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. $21.95. *World Cinema* is a survey of key issues within national film cultures as diverse as Germany, Australia, Taiwan, and South America. The volume is the third in its series, following *Film Studies: Critical Approaches* and *American Cinema and Hollywood: Critical Approaches,* and is composed of individual pieces on filmmakers, stars, and films, as well as essays providing detailed cultural information.

The first two sections, entitled "Redefining Cinema," provide a theoretical framework for the examination of individual national cinemas and reevaluate the concept of the Hollywood mainstream by looking at nonorthodox narrative filmmaking. Sixteen area studies, subdivided into sections on European, Anglophone, and World cinema, then address important movements and genres in the different national cinemas. An introduction to each subsection is valuable for providing comparisons across national film cultures. The case studies cover such topics as European film policy in response to Hollywood, or popular Indian cinema and viewership. The individual essays also supplement critical concepts (e.g., national cinema) introduced in the theoretical sections. The conclusion analyzes the impact of changing technologies on world cinema.

By way of criticism, I would note that the jumps across different time and space coordinates (from 1930s European film to Hong Kong cinema after 1997) are somewhat disorienting. The use of "world cinema" as an umbrella term to signify national cinemas, non-Hollywood filmmaking practices, or critical perspectives, depending on different contexts, is occasionally ambiguous. *World Cinema: Critical Approaches,* however, is eminently readable and highly informative, thanks to its up-to-date and authoritative analyses, and can be recommended as a comprehensive cultural guide to non-Hollywood cinema.

Yogini Joglekar

Muller, Eddie. *Dark City Dames: The Wicked Women of Film Noir*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001. $29.95. The film noir style, which impacted several of Hollywood's classical genres in the 40s and 50s, is perhaps best appreciated or accessed through its enigmatic females rather than its characteristic chiaroscuro or hard-boiled dialogue. This handsome edition, replete with indispensable photos, is Muller's second contribution to the ever-expanding library of film noir appreciation (he also wrote *Dark City: The Lost City of Film Noir*). Muller's approach is straightforward—he, rather fancifully, describes the youth and early careers of six memorable actresses who each made their own respective contributions to the noir legacy. In the second half of the book, Muller applies his colorful style again—this time picking up where he left off and describing the post-Hollywood lives of each of these women. Clearly, his often anecdotal accounts are the culmination of personal interviews Muller was privileged enough to enjoy with these increasingly iconic "dames."

Despite their collective association with noir films, each of these studio actresses came to Hollywood through unique circumstances and negotiated the studio system in different ways. Nevertheless, they all ultimately departed from their once aggressive acting careers to pursue fulfillment elsewhere. Jane Greer, originally from Washington D.C., would grapple with the likes of RKO's megalomaniacal Howard Hughes before finally leaving her mark as the consummate femme fatale in *Out of the Past*. After a bit part in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and a starring role in *Tension,* Audrey Totter, from Joliet, Illinois, became the house spiderwoman for MGM's noir efforts. Marie Windsor, formerly a Utah beauty queen, enjoyed a very prolific career as a typecast villain, working for both RKO (notably in *The Narrow Margin*) and MGM (*Force of Evil*), and ultimately starring in Kubrick's *The Killing*. Evelyn Keyes (*Johnny O'Clock, Frightened City*) attempted to transcend her loveless upbringing in Texas by pursuing acting, which eventually brought her to the attention of Cecil B. De Mille at Paramount; she later moved to Columbia, where she did her noir work. Coleen Gray became "the slumming angel of reason and redemption, ably wresting straying men away from the precipice" for Fox in films like *Kiss of Death* and *Nightmare Alley*. Lastly, Ann Savage, after experiencing a very nomadic youth in the South, eventually made a lasting impression in Ulmer's masterpiece *Detour,* besides working in several other PRC releases. Each of these six women has experienced continued acclaim for her impact on film noir—all accounted for in Muller's vivacious and loving tribute.

David Melbye